

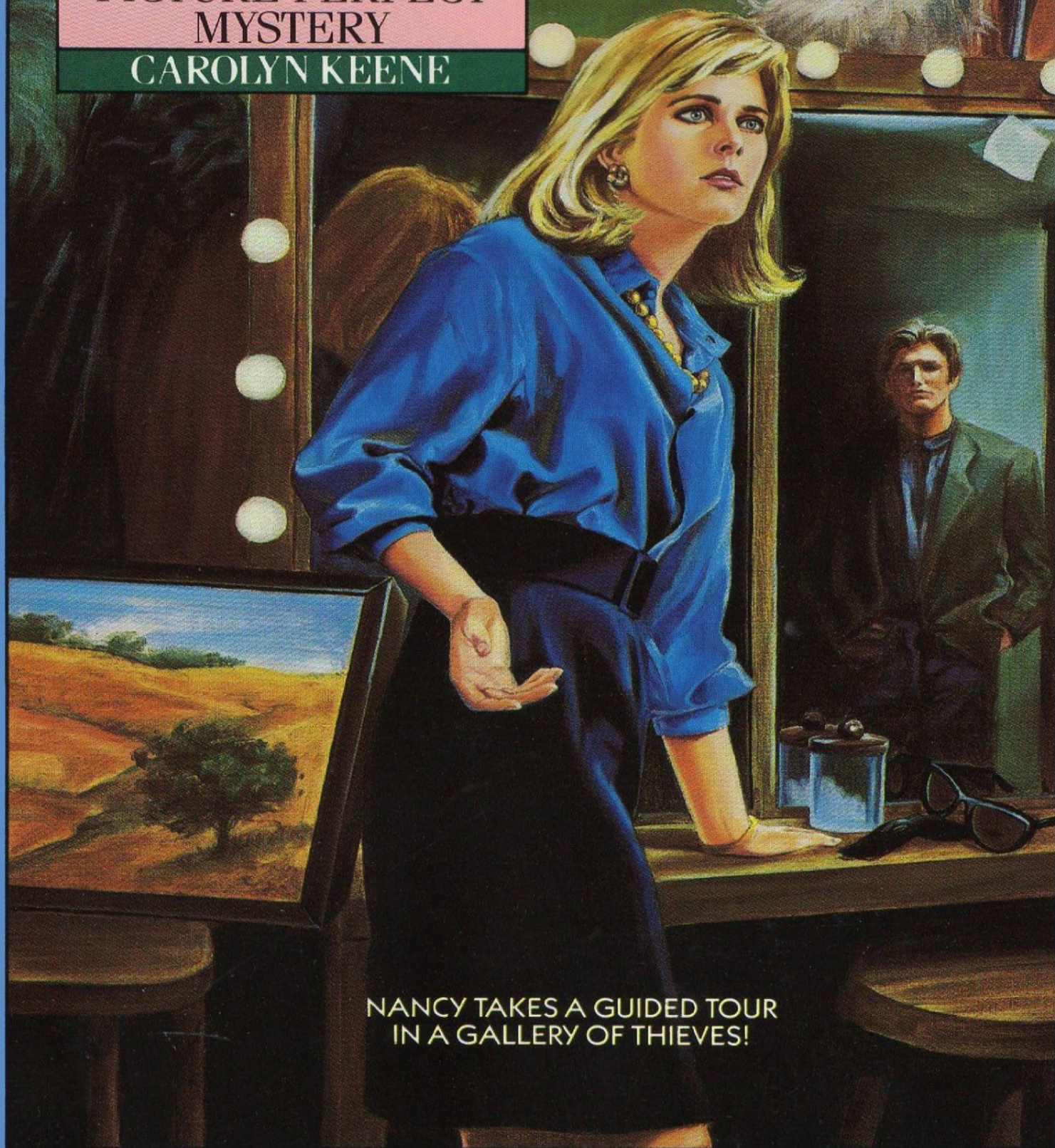
# NANCY DREW®

## THE PICTURE-PERFECT MYSTERY

CAROLYN KEENE

ALL-NEW! FIRST TIME PUBLISHED

94



NANCY TAKES A GUIDED TOUR  
IN A GALLERY OF THIEVES!



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# 1

## *Trouble at the Gallery*

“Wow, I’m about to meet a celebrity!” Bess Marvin said, hurrying up the sidewalk behind Nancy Drew. The two friends were on their way to the Cramer Gallery. “I can’t believe it!” She combed her straw blond hair with her fingers.

“Lila Cramer certainly has become famous in the past few years,” Nancy agreed. “Her paintings and watercolors are prized by collectors all over the country.”

“Then I guess they’re pretty valuable,” Bess added.

“You said it,” Nancy replied, laughing. “They’re definitely more expensive than the last posters we picked up at the mall.”

The summer morning was warm, and the girls were dressed in denim skirts and light blouses. Nancy, who was taller and slimmer than Bess, walked with long, fast strides, her reddish blond hair streaming behind her. Bess scurried after Nancy, and her pocketbook bumped against her slightly plump figure with her bouncing movements.

Nancy slowed her pace and turned to her friend, lowering her voice. “Let me warn you, Lila is quite a character.”

“Well, I think when a painter has worked as hard as Lila,” Bess whispered back, “she can be a little eccentric if she wants.”

“Here we are,” Nancy announced as they reached an imposing, two-story building.

The Cramer Gallery, located at the edge of the girls’ hometown of River Heights, had been converted from a private home. A porch ran along the front of the house. A wooden staircase led up to the porch, and next to it a ramp had been installed so that large works of art could easily be moved in and out.

The girls walked up the front porch steps and through the glass front door, which was propped open.

Inside, Nancy and Bess began to look around. The walls of the gallery were crowded with paintings, etchings, and drawings. Several partitions had been set up to create more hanging space.

The large main room was decorated in an elegant yet comfortable style that didn't detract from the artwork. Several pieces of antique furniture were tastefully arranged around the room. An oversize armchair upholstered in tapestry sat in one corner. A small drop-leaf table with a bowl of fresh flowers on top of it stood against a far wall, and an intricately carved wooden chest occupied another corner.

Many of the works of art hanging on the walls were landscapes in watercolor and oil paints. There were pencil-and-ink drawings of various subjects, including portraits and still lifes.

"This is a beautiful place!" Bess exclaimed, turning around to take in the setting around her.

"Yes, it certainly is," Nancy agreed. "Lila has done a wonderful job here."

"Did Lila do *all* of this art?" Bess asked.

A loud, booming voice came from behind them. "She may as well have! She keeps painting and painting, and still she can't keep up with the demand."

The girls turned to see a tall, attractive blond woman in her midforties standing with her arms folded in the middle of the gallery floor. She was dressed in cotton pants and a white blouse, and a colorful scarf was knotted at her neck.

"Lila," Nancy said, smiling. "It's so good to see you again."

Lila came over and shook Nancy's hand. "Hello, Nancy. You must be here to pick up Carson's painting."

"That's right," Nancy told her. "Dad bought it last week and had it framed. Lee Ann said it would be ready today."

"Well, I'm sure it is ready, then," Lila said brusquely. "I've hardly had a chance to keep in touch with day-to-day business

lately. You see, I've an exhibition coming up." She turned to the back of the gallery. "Lee Ann!"

Nancy said, "Lila, I'd like you to meet my good friend Bess Marvin. Bess, Lila Cramer."

Bess stuck out her hand. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Mrs. Cramer," she said excitedly. "I'm a big admirer of your work."

"Thank you," Lila said. She turned again and called out sharply, "Lee Ann!"

A pretty, young blond-haired woman about Nancy and Bess's age rushed from an adjoining room to stand at Lila's side. "Sorry, Mom, I was taking care of some business in the back." She beamed when she saw Nancy. "Nancy, how great to see you! I was hoping I'd be here when you came to pick up the painting."

"We should get together more often," Nancy said, returning the smile. "Lee Ann and I used to play together when we were little," she explained to Bess.

"Well, that was before life got so complicated," Lila said with a wave of her hand. "Is it ready, I hope?"

"What?" Lee Ann asked.

"The painting!" Lila said impatiently. "That's why Nancy is here. She's come to pick up the painting!"

Lee Ann laughed nervously. "Of course. Yes, the painting is ready. In fact, it just came back from the framer earlier this morning."

Lee Ann circled around an easel in the middle of the room, which displayed one of Lila's larger works, a country setting in watercolor. Going behind a small desk, she disappeared into a back room.

"I can't wait to see what Nancy's father bought," Bess said. "I'm sure it's wonderful—like all your work."

Lila smiled. "Well, thank you. I'm very pleased with my work at this point. My art is the most important thing in my life, you know." She sighed heavily. "My life *is* my work."

Nancy saw Bess's eyes widen in surprise. Nancy, too, was taken aback at Lila's remark. She glanced quickly toward the

back room to see if Lee Ann had heard what her mother said and was relieved to see that her friend had closed the door behind her. Lee Ann certainly would have been hurt to hear her mother say that her art was the *most* important thing in her life.

Lila hadn't always been so self-centered. Nancy remembered that she used to lavish a lot of attention on her daughter when Nancy and Lee Ann were kids. But about five years ago, when Lila had become recognized as one of the finest watercolor artists in the country, she had focused nearly all of her attention on her career. Suddenly, she had no time for her family and friends. Everyone who knew Lila was surprised by the change in her.

"As I was saying," Lila continued, "this exhibition has been taking my every waking moment."

"What exhibition is that, Lila?" Nancy asked.

Lila shrugged. "Oh, it's just a local thing next Saturday—I can't believe it, it's only four days away. Several local artists will be exhibiting, but there will be national press coverage, so it's particularly important that my work get good reviews from the judges." She smiled faintly. "Of course, I plan to win. The only possible competition is a local artist who really is not very good compared to me. I suppose that sounds conceited, but it's a simple fact." Lila sighed, then laughed quickly. "I'm not worried. Just busy! So if you will excuse me . . ."

"Of course," Nancy said.

Lila turned and hurried from the room, the scarf around her neck fluttering behind her.

"Here's your painting," Lee Ann said, passing her mother in the doorway. "It's still wrapped in paper from the framer. Do you want to open it?"

Bess touched Nancy's arm. "Oh, let's have a look!" she said. "I want to see which of Lila's paintings your father bought."

Lee Ann carefully unfastened the brown paper wrapping. Then, after taking down the large watercolor that had been standing on the easel, she set the painting Nancy's father had purchased in its place.

The girls gazed at the watercolor in silence for a moment. It was of a small, blue-eyed girl with reddish blond hair. The girl was standing on the bottom rail of a split-rail fence surrounded with wild flowers.

“Oh!” Bess gasped. “It’s just beautiful!”

“Recognize the girl in the painting?” Nancy asked Bess.

Bess leaned in and squinted a little, then took several steps backward, still concentrating. All at once, a wide smile spread across her face.

“Nancy, it’s *you*, isn’t it? When you were a little girl!”

“Right,” Nancy said. “Lila had taken Lee Ann and me to the park for a picnic.” She pointed to the painting. “This fence was at the edge of the park. I hopped up there, and Lila took a picture. Then a few months ago, she found the photo and decided to paint the picture.”

Lee Ann beamed. “She called Nancy’s father the day it was finished and told him that she had something she wanted to show him.”

“Wasn’t that nice of Lila?” Nancy said. “Dad was so pleased to be able to buy a Lila Cramer—”

“And of his own daughter!” Bess exclaimed.

“That day was so much fun, Nancy,” Lee Ann said, a faraway look in her eyes. “I can still remember it.” She smiled ruefully. “That was before Mom got famous and she—” Lee Ann caught herself in midsentence, looking embarrassed and flustered, as if she’d started to say something she shouldn’t have. “Well, she changed a little, I guess,” she finished after a pause.

Nancy looked at Lee Ann with concern. She could see the pain in her friend’s green eyes and knew Lee Ann missed the days when her mother had had time for her.

“That *was* a great day,” Nancy said gently, then shifted the subject to the painting. “And I’m sure Dad is going to be very pleased.”

“Lee Ann!” Lila’s voice called out, sharp as a whip, from the adjoining room. “I’m going to a meeting about the exhibition. You hold down the fort while I’m gone, okay?”

“Sure,” Lee Ann said. “No problem, Mom. I’ll be here.”

“So you like the painting, Nancy?” Lila asked, sweeping back into the room and gathering up her bag and a notebook.

“Of course!” Nancy told her. “It’s beautiful and a great way to remember that day in the park with you and Lee Ann.”

“Good,” Lila said. She flew past the girls on her way to the door. “I knew Carson would like it, too. I think it’s one of my better works.” Turning, she looked seriously at Nancy and added, “You got a good deal.”

“I know we did,” Nancy said. “Thank you, Lila. I love it.”

Lila nodded, slipped out the door, and was gone.

“Wow!” Bess exclaimed. “Your mother is really something, Lee Ann. What energy! She really has a passion for her work, doesn’t she?”

“You can say that again,” Lee Ann said, but Nancy thought the smile on her friend’s lips was a little sad. “She really is focusing all of that energy on the exhibition this Saturday.”

“It must be exciting living around all of this,” Bess said, her sweeping gesture including the entire gallery. “The glamour, the receptions, the other artists you get to rub elbows with—”

“Yes, it is exciting,” Lee Ann agreed. “But sometimes, that excitement can get you down.” She paused a moment, and her smile faded. “You know, preparing for an exhibition can be pretty stressful, especially the last few weeks before an opening. Choosing the paintings, framing them, getting them to the exhibit—it gets pretty crazy around here sometimes.” Lee Ann took a deep breath. “In fact, there are times when I wish I could just disappear for a while and come back when Mom’s already gotten all the wonderful comments and reviews, after the show is over. That’s when she finally calms down a little.”

“And you can return to normal,” Nancy said with an understanding smile.

“Well, almost normal,” Lee Ann said.

There were footsteps at the front entrance, and the three girls turned to see a tall, slender man with dark-framed glasses walk



into the gallery. Above a bushy mustache he had a large, bulbous nose.

"Excuse me," Lee Ann whispered to Nancy and Bess. "I'd better help this guy. Stick around a little bit, okay?"

"Sure," Nancy agreed.

"Nancy's not on a case right now, if you can believe it," Bess said, grinning. "So we're just running errands and enjoying the summer."

Nancy Drew had become quite well-known around River Heights as a young detective who solved mysteries for people who asked her for help. Even Chief McGinnis, of the River Heights police department, had been impressed on many occasions with Nancy's talents for sleuthing.

While Lee Ann went to wait on the customer, Nancy took her father's painting off the easel and carefully replaced it with the watercolor of the country scene.

"This is all so interesting," Bess whispered to her. "I wish George could be here." George Fayne, Bess's cousin, was also a close friend of Nancy's. "She's going to die when she gets back from vacation and I tell her that I met the famous Lila Cramer!"

"George *would* have enjoyed it," Nancy agreed.

Bess's face took on a solemn look. "Lila sure seems like a dragon lady, the way she treats Lee Ann" she said.

"Well, she wasn't always like that," Nancy explained, keeping her voice low so Lee Ann wouldn't hear. "It could be that she's just nervous about the exhibition."

"Maybe you're right," Bess said.

Nancy and Bess split up and wandered separately around the gallery to look at the paintings displayed. Nancy checked the names of the artists of the paintings she passed and found that Lila's works were the most prominently displayed of all those in the gallery.

As she walked around, Nancy noticed out of the corner of her eye that the tall man had picked out a painting. Lee Ann led him to the small desk.

All at once, the girls heard a dull, rumbling sound coming from outside of the building.

Bess and Nancy looked up.

“Is it thundering?” Bess asked. “It can’t be.”

“What in the world—?” Lee Ann said.

A flash of red streaked past the porch windows, and then, as the girls stared in disbelief, a small boy on a bike raced into the gallery.

“Stop!” Nancy yelled at him. She lurched forward to grab him, but the boy swerved out of her way just before she reached him.

“Rrrrrrrrrrrr!” he hollered.

The boy drove his bike across the gallery carpet and, with a crash, plowed right into the easel in the middle of the room. The easel, the bike, and the boy landed in a heap in the middle of the gallery floor—and Lila’s watercolor clattered down next to them!

## 2

### *Tricked!*

“Oh, no! The painting!” Lee Ann shrieked. She rushed to where the boy had fallen, leaving her customer standing at the desk.

“Are you all right?” Nancy asked the boy. Bess stood next to Nancy, glaring at the child, as Nancy helped him untangle his legs from under his bicycle. He looked about seven and had brown eyes and a head of tousled dark curls. He was wearing shorts and a red T-shirt.

“Yeah, I guess,” the boy mumbled. “Skinned my knee.” Sitting on the gallery floor, he pulled his knee up to examine the damage. Then, glancing nervously up at the girls who were surrounding him, he made a move to get up.

Nancy placed a firm hand on his shoulder to stop him. “That was a silly thing to do. And dangerous,” she said, frowning at the boy. “You could’ve hurt yourself or somebody else. Luckily, you got just a rug burn.”

“I gotta go,” the boy mumbled. He pulled away from Nancy and jumped quickly to his feet.

Lee Ann picked up her mother’s painting, which had landed facedown on the floor. “Oh,” she said softly, “my mother’s going to kill me.”

“Is the painting damaged?” Bess asked.

Lee Ann examined it closely, her face tight with concern. “It seems okay,” she told them, breathing a sigh of relief. “The frame isn’t nicked, either.” She looked up at Nancy and smiled. “No harm done, I guess.”

“I gotta go,” the boy said again. He pulled his bike up off the floor.

The girls turned as a young man with dark eyes and dark, wavy hair rushed in from the back room. "What happened in here?" he asked. "I could hear the noise all the way in the back office."

"Oh, Rodney," Lee Ann said, "it's okay. This boy rode his bike up the ramp and into the gallery. He knocked himself and Mom's painting over, but there was no damage."

Rodney scowled at the boy. After taking the painting from Lee Ann, he examined it, then set it back up on the easel. "Kids," he mumbled irritably under his breath.

"Okay, you can go," Nancy told the boy. "But remember, an art gallery is no place to ride a bike."

The boy wheeled his bike around to face the door and threw a leg over the seat. Seeing that he was going to climb back on, Nancy grabbed the handlebars and stopped him.

"I told you, an art gallery is no place to ride a bike," she repeated firmly. Putting her hands on the boy's shoulders, she steered him with his bike out the door. "And stick to the sidewalk from now on."

"Okay, okay," the boy mumbled. He hopped on his bike, rolled down the ramp, and disappeared down the street.

Nancy came back inside.

"Can you believe that?" Bess said. "He rode his bicycle up the ramp, right into the building!"

"Oh!" Lee Ann cried, her hands flying to her mouth. "I nearly forgot about my customer!"

The girls turned to look at the tall man, who was still standing at the desk and waiting patiently.

While Lee Ann returned to her customer to finish the sale, Nancy turned to the young man who had come out of the back office.

"Hi, I'm Nancy Drew," she said, extending her hand.

"Rodney Walden," the young man responded, taking Nancy's hand and shaking it.

"This is my friend Bess Marvin," Nancy said.

Bess and Rodney nodded hello.



“Is it always this exciting around here?” Nancy asked.

Rodney frowned. “I’m surprised we haven’t had any incidents before this,” he said.

“Really?” Nancy was surprised. “Why?”

“The gallery is wide open, as always,” Rodney muttered, gesturing angrily toward the front door, which was still propped open. “Lila always leaves it open when the weather is good.” He scowled. “She says she likes the fresh air, but she’s just asking for trouble. I’ve told her a million times . . .”

Nancy nodded but said nothing. She thought it curious that he would get so angry about Lila leaving the gallery door open.

Rodney turned and stalked off toward a group of paintings on the far wall. He straightened one that hung slightly askew.

“Thank you,” Lee Ann said to her customer. She signed the bill of sale for the painting and gave the duplicate to the man. “Come again,” she said with a smile.

“Thank you,” the man said. His voice was low and soft. “I’ll be back before the exhibition.” He turned and walked out of the gallery with the painting under his arm, nodding to Nancy as he passed.

“This is a busy place,” Nancy said to Lee Ann, as she and Bess stepped over to join her at the desk. “You know, maybe that kid was actually good for business. That guy said he’s coming back.”

Lee Ann laughed, waving the contract she had just signed. “Well, I’m just so glad Mom’s painting wasn’t hurt. I can’t even imagine having to tell her that one of her paintings was damaged!” She sighed. “But I won’t have to, since it wasn’t harmed.”

She glanced toward the front of the gallery. “Well, I’m going to shut the door,” she said, hurrying over to it.

“Isn’t that an example of locking the barn door after the horse has bolted?” Bess joked.

“Right,” Lee Ann said. “But at least I won’t have to worry about any more bike riders getting in.” She was about to close the door firmly when she looked out toward the street. “Oh,

good, here's Annette. You'll like her. She usually comes in about this time."

A petite brunette appeared at the front door and smiled a greeting to Lee Ann.

Lee Ann put her arm around the fragile-looking young woman. "Nancy, Bess, I'd like you to meet Annette Hoops. You thought my mother and I manage the gallery? Well, we got the business started, but I can tell you that it's Annette who practically runs this place."

Annette beamed with pleasure as she shook hands with Nancy and Bess.

"You must do a good job, Annette," Nancy said. "The gallery is beautiful. It's obviously managed very well."

"Thank you," said Annette. Her voice was soft, and her eyes were big and brown. Nancy thought she seemed shy, but there was a gentle grace about her, too.

"You missed all the excitement," Rodney said, striding over to the others, in the middle of the gallery.

"Excitement?" Annette asked. "What happened?"

Lee Ann sighed deeply. "A little boy evidently got tired of his usual bike route and thought he'd pedal into the gallery."

Annette's hands covered her mouth. "In here?" Lee Ann nodded. "Oh, no!"

"He crashed into Mom's painting on the easel," Lee Ann continued, "and—well, created quite a commotion."

"Was anything damaged?" Annette asked.

"No, thank goodness," Lee Ann said with a laugh. "I was pretty nervous for a minute there, though."

"It was all Lila's fault," Rodney said.

"Lila's fault?" Annette asked. "Was she here?"

"No," Lee Ann said. "Rodney means Mom's penchant for leaving the front door open."

"It's not just the door," Rodney put in angrily. He turned to Lee Ann. "Let's face it. If your mother would take care of some of the essential business details around here instead of thinking about herself all the time—"

“Rodney, I don’t want to hear it,” Lee Ann protested. “Mom’s on edge because of the exhibition. You’re an artist, you know what she’s going through—”

Lee Ann’s voice was quiet, but Nancy could see anger flashing in her green eyes. And no wonder her old friend was very upset, Nancy thought. Listening to an employee of the gallery criticize her mother was not pleasant.

Annette’s high voice piped up. “Rodney, what’s done is done. Let’s forget about the door. We’ll be more careful after this. And as far as Lila is concerned, well, she’s doing her best. Lee Ann is right. Lila has a lot on her mind.”

Rodney glared at Annette. “Spoken like the perfect, loyal employee that you are,” he said, his voice thick with sarcasm.

Nancy watched Rodney. If he was so disgruntled, she wondered, why did he continue to work at the gallery?

“You don’t have to attack Annette, Rodney,” Lee Ann said. “We’re lucky to have her.”

“Lila treats you like garbage, and you just take it,” Rodney said to Annette.

“*Garbage?*” Annette’s mouth was open with surprise.

Rodney opened his mouth to say something more, but then he glanced at Nancy and Bess and stopped himself. “Oh, forget it,” he muttered angrily. Then he turned and stalked away.

There was an awkward silence before Annette spoke. “Thank you, Lee Ann,” she said softly. “I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

Bess’s eyes had trailed Rodney as he stormed from the room. Turning back to the others, she blew out an exasperated breath. “He must be loads of fun to work with,” she said, just loud enough for them to hear.

Annette smiled tightly, and Lee Ann shook her head in disgust.

“He really *is* an artist,” Lee Ann said in a low whisper. “His temper is as crazy as Mom’s. He certainly should give her a break.” She paused before continuing. “Rodney has seemed pretty unhappy lately, but this is the first time I’ve seen him act

like this. He'd better change his attitude, though. Mom won't allow him to work here if he's going to blow up at every little thing."

Lee Ann turned to Annette, who was standing next to her. "And I couldn't begin to guess why he turned on you."

"It's okay," Annette told her. "If I'm not used to Rodney by now, I shouldn't be working here. But I have to admit, he seems angrier than usual today."

"Yes, he does," Lee Ann agreed. She turned back to Nancy and Bess. "Anyway, I'm sorry that you two had to see this. First, that kid rides in here on his bike, and then one disgruntled employee mouths off." She smiled ruefully. "I'll bet your opinion about being in the art business isn't so hot anymore!"

Nancy smiled warmly at her old friend. "Of course not, Lee Ann," she said. "I've been here plenty of times. The Cramer Gallery fully deserves its reputation for talent and professionalism."

"Thanks for being so understanding," Lee Ann said, touching Nancy's arm.

Nancy glanced at her watch. "Well, Bess and I have to go. I told Dad I'd run a few errands for him before lunch."

"It was great to see you, Nancy," Lee Ann told her. "Again, I'm sorry about this morning—"

"Forget it," Nancy said. "I just wish we had more time to look around. Your mom's work is great, and she really knows how to choose other artists' work, too."

"Then you'll have to come back," Lee Ann said.

"Right." Nancy and Bess moved toward the front door, with Lee Ann following. "The three of us should all have lunch next week. Bess is very interested in art, too."

"You bet I am!" Bess said to Lee Ann. "And I never turn down an offer for lunch," she added with a grin.

Nancy smiled. It was true. Bess loved to eat, and she especially adored rich, fattening things.

"Then it's a date," Lee Ann said. "I'm so glad your father bought this painting." She tapped the wrapped painting that



Nancy picked up and held under her arm.

“So am I,” Nancy said. “I’ll call you soon.”

“Great.” Lee Ann waved goodbye, the yellow bill of sale still in her hand.

Nancy pulled open the heavy glass door. “’Bye,” she said.

She and Bess walked out onto the front porch and pulled the door closed behind them.

“Oh, the drama in the lives of creative types,” Bess said. “That was quite a visit!”

“The Cramer Gallery isn’t always that lively,” Nancy told her. “The atmosphere is usually more sedate.”

“I like it this way,” Bess said, as they walked down the porch steps. “It’s much more interesting.”

Nancy and Bess had almost reached Nancy’s blue sports car when the front door to the gallery was yanked open behind them. Lee Ann rushed toward them, her face drained of color.

“Nancy!” she gasped.

Nancy turned and was shocked to see her friend’s face drawn, her eyes full of fear. “What’s wrong, Lee Ann?” she asked, worried.

“I’ve made a terrible mistake!” Lee Ann said, choking on her words. She waved the yellow bill of sale in front of her. “I sold *all* of my mother’s paintings for the price of just *one*!”

## *A Confession*

“What!” Nancy cried. “How could that have happened?”

A tear rolled down Lee Ann’s cheek. “Remember the guy who was in the gallery a few minutes ago?” she asked.

“Yes,” Nancy said. “That tall man with the bushy mustache.”

“Right.” Lee Ann nodded and brushed the tear away. “He was waiting at the desk when that boy rode in on the bike.”

“I remember,” Nancy said. “I thought it was kind of strange that he didn’t come over to check out all the commotion.”

“Well,” Lee Ann rushed on, “while we were distracted, he added a few words to the bill of sale that entitle him to *all* of Mom’s paintings!” Lee Ann bit her lower lip. “I have to clear this up, Nancy. I can’t tell my mother what I’ve done. She’ll kill me!”

Nancy frowned. “There has to be some mistake, Lee Ann,” she said. “Let me see the bill of sale.”

She took the yellow paper and examined it. “I’m afraid you’re right,” she said. “That’s the way it looks. You know, I heard the man say he’d be back before the exhibition.”

“So did I!” Lee Ann cried. “I thought he meant he wanted to *look* at more paintings. But now—Oh, no! Do you think he’s coming back to *take* the rest of the paintings?”

Nancy nodded. “That must be what he meant.”

“What am I going to do?” Lee Ann asked, her eyes filled with dread. “Mom needs those paintings for the exhibition on Saturday. This is Tuesday! We have only four days to get this straightened out.”

Nancy put an arm around her friend’s shoulder. “We’ll get to the bottom of this, Lee Ann,” she assured her.

“You know,” Bess said, “it’s quite a coincidence that the boy just happened to ride into the gallery when the guy was here.”

Nancy nodded. “That’s what I was thinking.”

“You mean, you think the man put the little boy up to riding his bike into the gallery?” Lee Ann asked.

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Nancy said.

She looked down the street. “He went in that direction,” she told the others. “I told him to ride safely, and he rode down the ramp and turned right.”

“Do you think it’s too late to catch the man?” Lee Ann asked anxiously.

“He’s probably long gone,” Nancy said, shaking her head, “but we might be able to find the kid if he lives around here. Bess, let’s drive around the neighborhood.”

“Good idea,” Bess said. “I’ll go get the car.”

Nancy handed Bess the keys to her Mustang, and Bess hurried off around the side of the gallery to the parking lot.

“Oh, Nancy,” Lee Ann said, “thank you for helping me with this. I don’t know what I’ll do if we can’t get hold of that man and straighten this out. Mom needs those paintings. She’ll be furious if she finds out what happened!”

“Maybe we can solve this problem without telling Lila right away,” Nancy said. “She may have to be told at some point, Lee Ann,” she added, “but for now, the first thing we need to do is find that little boy.”

Bess suddenly came running from the side of the gallery.

“Nancy!” Bess was gesturing wildly and pointing back in the direction she’d come from. “Come quick!”

“What is it?” Nancy asked.

“The boy! He’s sitting on his bike with some other kids behind the gallery. Come quick before he leaves!”

Nancy dashed across the gallery lawn and followed Bess around the side of the building. She spotted the boy in the red shirt right away and slowed to a fast walk, not wanting to startle him into running away.

She and Bess were halfway across the yard when the boy looked up and saw them.

“Uh-oh. I gotta go,” Nancy heard him say to his friends. Taking a running start, he threw his leg over the seat of his bike and took off.

Nancy broke into a run. She flew by the boys and took a shortcut across the yard next door, Bess following fast behind her.

The boy glanced back over his shoulder at Nancy and pedaled even faster.

“Stop!” Nancy yelled. “I just want to talk to you!”

He continued to pedal furiously, trying to put more and more distance between himself and Nancy. Again, he turned to take a quick look back at her. This time, however, he missed seeing the rut in the pavement just in front of his tire.

For the second time that morning the boy toppled over, landing with a smack on the sidewalk under his bike.

Nancy reached him seconds later. Lifting the bike off the boy, she checked quickly to see that he wasn’t hurt. Then she grabbed him firmly by the arm so that he wouldn’t bolt.

“I didn’t do anything,” the boy cried, his eyes wide with fear.

“I didn’t say you did,” Nancy said calmly.

Bess reached them then, huffing and puffing for air.

“So why are you chasing me?” the boy asked.

“I told you, I want to talk to you and ask you some questions.” Nancy softened her voice. The boy seemed awfully scared, and she wondered why.

Leading him to a grassy spot at the edge of the sidewalk, she sat him on the ground and asked, “What’s your name?”

“Mike Hawkins,” the boy said.

“Well, Mike,” Nancy said, “I want to know why you rode your bike into the gallery this morning.”

“I was going for a ride,” Mike mumbled, looking at the ground.

“I figured that,” Nancy said. “But why did you ride your bike into the gallery? You’ve never done that before, have you?”



“No.”

“Well?”

“I just did,” Mike said.

“Did anyone tell you to do it?” Nancy asked.

Mike didn’t answer.

Nancy decided to level with him. “Something not very nice happened in the gallery while we were paying attention to you.”

Mike looked sincerely curious. “What happened?” he asked.

“A man in the gallery tricked my friend into selling a lot of paintings, but he paid for only one of them.”

He squinted up at Nancy. “He tricked her? Like a joke?”

“Oh, he wasn’t joking at all,” Nancy said. “He cheated her.”

“Cheated?” Mike’s eyes widened. “I don’t like cheaters,” he said.

“Well, maybe you can help catch this cheater if you answer my questions,” Nancy told him.

Mike nodded. “Okay. I’ll help.”

“Did someone tell you to ride your bike into the gallery?” Nancy asked.

“Well, yeah, I guess so.”

“Was it the man who was in the gallery this morning when you rode your bike in?”

Mike thought for a second and then said, “Yeah, that was him. He gave me five whole dollars to ride into the store and bump into something.”

He took three dimes and two nickels out of his pocket and held them up.

“That’s only forty cents,” Bess pointed out. “Where’s the rest of it?”

“Spent it.” Reaching into his pocket again, Mike held up a plastic bag of balloons.

“That didn’t cost five dollars,” Bess said.

“Gum, too,” the boy said. “And candy bars. I was giving ’em to the guys when you came out and started chasing me.”

“Do you know the man who gave you the five dollars?” Nancy asked.

"Nope. Saw him in the park," Mike said. "He goes there sometimes and eats lunch. I've seen him there before."

"He eats lunch in the park frequently?" Nancy asked.

"Yeah. He likes bologna sandwiches."

"Can you tell me anything else about him?" Nancy asked, trying to keep the conversation on track.

"I've never seen him eat peanut butter. That's my favorite."

Nancy smiled. "I mean, can you tell me anything more, like his name? Or where he lives?"

Mike shook his head. "Nope."

"Okay, Mike. That's all." Nancy stood up. "Thanks for answering my questions."

"So did I help you?"

"Yes," Nancy said, grinning. "You can go, but be careful on that bike of yours. You seem to be accident prone."

Mike flashed them a wave, then headed down the street on his bike.

"Isn't that incredible?" Bess said. "Using a little kid like that to pull a scam?"

"Yes," Nancy said. "Mike obviously had no idea what was going on. But I wonder why that man wanted *all* of Lila's paintings. I suppose he could be either an art lover or someone who wants to make trouble for Lila."

The girls walked back to the gallery, where they found a frantic Lee Ann pleading with Annette and Rodney.

"Just please don't tell my mother about what happened," Lee Ann was saying. "If she has to be told eventually, I want to do it myself. Okay? Can I count on you both?"

"Of course," Annette said at once.

Lee Ann turned to Rodney. "How about you, Rodney? Will you please not tell Mother? She doesn't need the aggravation before the exhibition, when everything is so hectic. I'm sure Nancy will be able to straighten this out."

Nancy didn't like the sneer she saw on Rodney's face. She put a hand on Lee Ann's shoulder and said, "I hope so, Lee Ann. I'll do my best."

Lee Ann hadn't taken her eyes off Rodney. "Rodney?" Lee Ann pressed. "Can I count on you?"

"You're afraid of her, aren't you?" he asked in his taunting voice.

"Rodney, just tell Lee Ann she can count on you," Annette said. "*She* doesn't need the aggravation, either."

"Your mother is really something," Rodney muttered with disgust. "She even has her own daughter afraid of her!"

Lee Ann's face turned red. "Rodney, I want you to know that immediately after the exhibition, I'm going to talk to my mother about you," she said angrily. "I'd tell her now how you've been acting, but she has enough to worry about with all the preparations for Saturday."

Rodney shrugged. "Sure, Lee Ann. Mum's the word. We certainly wouldn't want to upset Lila Cramer, would we?"

Nancy watched Rodney. He was bitter—maybe even bitter enough to plot against Lila's gallery. She touched Lee Ann's arm to get her attention. "Lee Ann, could Bess and I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure," Lee Ann agreed. "Come into the back office."

The three girls walked to the back of the gallery and through the door behind the desk. It led into a small office.

"Have a seat," Lee Ann told them. "Did you find the boy?"

"Yes," Nancy said, sitting down on a sturdy wooden chair. Bess sat in a chair next to her. Opposite them was a large antique rolltop desk and a few filing cabinets. That was about all that could fit in the small space.

Lee Ann, still nervous, remained standing. "Who was he? What did he tell you?" she asked anxiously.

"The kid's name is Mike Hawkins," Nancy explained. "He said he was paid to ride in here this morning."

"He was paid?" Lee Ann looked confused.

"By the man who pulled the con," Nancy continued, "to create a diversion."

"Unbelievable," Lee Ann said, shaking her head. "Who would want to do such a thing?"

“I wish I could answer that,” Nancy said. “Mike said he met the man in the park and that the man has lunch there pretty often.”

Lee Ann covered her face with her hands. “I just can’t believe this is happening,” she said. “Maybe I’ll wake up and realize it was all a bad dream.”

The door behind Lee Ann burst open, causing all three girls to jump.

“What’s going on in here?” Lila stood in the doorway. “My goodness, Nancy, I didn’t expect to find you still here. The meeting was postponed—”

It was then that she noticed Lee Ann’s white face.

“Lee Ann, what’s wrong? You look as if you’ve seen a ghost.”

Lee Ann swallowed hard, her eyes glazing over. Nancy could see that her friend was trying to figure out what to say to her mother.

“Well, Lila,” Nancy said quickly, glancing over at a nervous Lee Ann. She wanted to give Lee Ann a second to recover herself. “We had a little excitement while you were gone.”

“What?” Lila’s voice rose with alarm. “What happened?” Nancy understood immediately why Lee Ann didn’t want to tell her mother about the eon. Lila was practically hysterical, and she didn’t even know what had happened!

“A little boy rode his bike up the ramp and into the gallery,” Nancy explained in a calm voice. “He knocked over your painting on the easel—”

“What! Was it damaged?” Lila shrieked the question. Without waiting for an answer, she whirled around and strode out of the office, heading straight for her painting.

“It’s okay, Mom,” Lee Ann said, hurrying out of the small room after Lila.

Bess sighed and looked at Nancy, who shook her head. It was easy to see that Lila would be difficult to live with day after day.

The two friends followed Lee Ann into the gallery and found Lila standing by the easel, examining the painting closely. “It’s

all right," she said, turning to Lee Ann. "Thank goodness. Did this boy attack anything else?"

"No," Lee Ann said. "And he didn't attack it, Mom. He just knocked it over."

"Well, how could you let that happen?" Lila demanded. "Weren't you here? Didn't you see the boy coming?"

"It all happened so fast that I couldn't stop him," Lee Ann said anxiously. As her mother bent toward the painting again, Lee Ann looked straight at Nancy with a meaningful gaze that seemed to say, "I'm not going to tell her any more."

Nancy nodded her understanding. After watching Lila's extreme reaction to the story of the boy on the bike, she understood more clearly why Lee Ann was so frantic to keep the rest of the story from her mother. That meant Nancy had to act as quickly as possible to find out who the man was who'd bought the paintings and why he would want to hurt Lila.

Of course, it was quite possible that the man was working with someone else, Nancy thought. But who? She took a quick look around her. Rodney was pacing the room, scowling. Annette had busied herself with work at the desk, but it was obvious that she was listening carefully to the conversation. Nancy knew her next step would be to learn more about these two employees.

Lila continued her survey of the gallery, making sure that nothing else was damaged. After several minutes, she apparently was satisfied that nothing had been damaged and gradually calmed down. Running her hand lovingly over the frame of one of her watercolors, she smiled a little to herself and said, "I have to say that these water-colors are some of my best pieces. The judges will certainly give me high points for them. They're the best ever."

Nancy was glad of Lila's preoccupation with herself. If she concentrated on her art for the next few days, Lila probably wouldn't pay much attention to gallery business. That would give Nancy a chance to solve this mystery before Lila ever found out there *was* a mystery.

Lila let out a soft chuckle. “I can’t wait to see the look on Jennifer’s face when I’m chosen the winner. She thinks she can unseat me this year as the best watercolor artist in this part of the country.”

Nancy glanced at Lee Ann and Bess and tilted her chin toward the front door, indicating that they should follow her out to the porch.

“Poor Mom,” Lee Ann said, once the three girls were outside. “She’s so anxious about the exhibition. She panics when anything out of the ordinary happens.”

“Yes,” Nancy said. “She does seem awfully nervous. I’m curious about the person she just mentioned in there. Who is Jennifer? Her competition?”

Lee Ann nodded. “In Mom’s eyes, she is. Jennifer Williams—she owns the Red Door Gallery—used to be her good friend, but ever since Mom’s career took off, she considers Jennifer to be some kind of rival. Actually, Jennifer *has* received quite a lot of favorable attention lately. Her work is selling well for the first time ever. She’s a talented woman, but she really isn’t a threat to Mom. She just doesn’t have Mom’s unique talent. Besides, Jennifer’s style is very different from Mom’s. They each have their own clientele and their own fans.”

Nancy nodded, mentally adding Jennifer to her list of possible suspects. “I can see why your mother feels threatened, though,” she told Lee Ann, “if Jennifer’s reputation has grown quickly.”

“Nancy,” Lee Ann said worriedly, “the man said he’d return before the exhibition on Saturday. Can you solve this before he comes back?”

“I’m certainly going to try,” Nancy promised. Then she and Bess said goodbye to Lee Ann. They were about to head back down the porch steps when Nancy thought of something.

“Oh, before I leave,” she said, “could I borrow that bill of sale? I want my father to look it over. Since he’s a lawyer, maybe he’ll have some ideas about how to approach this case.”



“Sure,” Lee Ann said. She pulled the yellow paper from her pocket and explained, “I tucked this away so my mother wouldn’t find it.”

“Great,” Nancy said, taking the paper. “I’ll check this out with Dad. Then our next step is to find the man who pulled the con and stop him!”

## 4

### *Stranger in the Park*

“Coffeecake, Nancy?” Hannah Gruen asked the next morning. She was holding up a large pan that smelled sweetly of hot butter and cinnamon.

Nancy’s stomach grumbled as she eyed the frosting drizzled over the top. “That looks great, Hannah,” she said. “I’d love a piece.”

Hannah was the Drews’ housekeeper. She had lived with Nancy and her father since Mrs. Drew’s death, when Nancy was three years old. Hannah was like one of the family, and she mothered Nancy as if she were her own daughter.

Carson Drew sat across the table from his daughter. “I’d like a piece, too, Hannah,” he said, smiling as he watched Nancy bite with relish into her coffeecake. “That is, if Nancy doesn’t eat it all first.”

“Don’t think I wouldn’t love to do just that,” Nancy said. “Hannah, this is delicious!”

“I copied the recipe out of a magazine yesterday,” Hannah said. “It is good, isn’t it?”

As Carson took a piece of the cake, he asked Nancy, “Did you get a chance to pick up the painting at the Cramer Gallery yesterday?”

“Yes, I did. And the weirdest thing happened while we were there.”

Nancy filled Carson and Hannah in on what had taken place at the gallery the day before.

“Sounds like something you’d see on a TV show,” Hannah said. She looked dubiously at Nancy. “And—don’t tell me—you’re going to investigate for Lee Ann.”

“I’m going to try.” Nancy took the bill of sale from the pocket of her robe and held it up for her father to see.

“What do you think?” she asked.

Carson read the yellow paper carefully.

“Is this Lee Ann’s signature?” he asked, pointing to the bottom of the page.

“Yes,” Nancy told him.

“Well, this document might not hold up in court,” Carson said. “You do have witnesses to show that the man took advantage of the accident to change the bill.” He frowned then and looked over at his daughter. “But I’m concerned about this con. Lila certainly wouldn’t want the publicity that this case could stir up.”

“She sure wouldn’t,” Nancy agreed. “I’ve been trying to think why anyone would want to pull this scam on her. Do you think the man responsible might want to ruin her career?”

Carson considered the question for a long moment, but his only response was, “Maybe.”

“Since Lila hasn’t exactly endeared herself to people,” Nancy said, “I’ll need to check out everyone connected to her or her gallery—employees, competitors, everybody.”

Her father nodded. “If I were Lila, I’d want to get this wrapped up quickly.”

Nancy winced. “Lila doesn’t know about any of this yet, Dad,” she explained. “Lee Ann is afraid to tell her about the con.”

“Well, knowing how high-strung Lila is,” Carson said with a wry smile, “I can’t say that I blame Lee Ann. You’ve got a deadline here, too, don’t you? When is the exhibition?”

“Saturday,” Nancy told him. “That’s just three days from now. And the man said something about coming back to the gallery *before* the show.”

“To pick up the paintings?” Carson asked.

“I suppose that’s what he meant.”

“You certainly don’t have much time. Lila can’t compete in a juried exhibition without paintings.” Carson fingered his fork

thoughtfully, then gave Nancy a look of encouragement. "Well, see what you can come up with."

Placing a hand over Nancy's, he added, "But as usual, just be careful."

• • •

"So where are we headed?" Bess asked, plopping herself in Nancy's blue Mustang later that morning.

"To the Cramer Gallery," Nancy said. "I want to ask Lee Ann a few questions. But we shouldn't stay too long. I'd like to be at the park by eleven-thirty to see if our swindler comes to have his lunch."

Nancy steered the Mustang toward the gallery. The day was warm but pleasant, and the open windows allowed the warm breeze to ruffle the girls' hair. The air smelled of the summer heat, hot pavement, and freshly cut grass.

Ten minutes later, Nancy parked behind the gallery and the girls went inside. Lee Ann spotted them as soon as they came in the glass door.

"Hi, Nancy, Bess," she greeted them, rushing over from behind the desk.

Annette smiled from the back of the gallery and waved, but Lee Ann steered Nancy and Bess away from the petite brunette, motioning them to follow her to a corner in the front of the gallery. She seemed anxious to speak to them alone.

"How are you going to find the con man, Nancy?" Lee Ann asked. Her voice was a nervous whisper. "I was so worried and upset about him that I couldn't sleep."

"I have an idea where we might find him," Nancy said, "but I want to ask you something first. Lee Ann, is there any possibility that you might have seen that man before yesterday? Was there anything remotely familiar about him that you can remember?"

Lee Ann thought for a moment, then shook her head. "I'd never seen him before in my life. Why?"

"I was wondering whether the man was an art lover or if you knew of any reason why he might want to hurt your mother."

"He was a complete stranger to me," Lee Ann said.

"Do you think you might be able to get away for a bit?" Nancy asked.

Lee Ann glanced back over her shoulder. "I guess I could. Annette's here and Rodney's due in half an hour."

"Great," Nancy said. "Let's go."

"Where are we headed?" Lee Ann asked, following Nancy and Bess out the door.

"It's called a stakeout," Bess said.

Lee Ann smiled. "Sounds like a TV cop show."

"Except that on TV they don't show you that ninety percent of the time spent on a stakeout is incredibly boring," Nancy said with a laugh. "You just sit around and wait. But the other ten percent's about as exciting as you can get!"

"Who are we staking out?" Lee Ann asked.

"Our swindler, if we're lucky," Nancy said. "Maybe he'll show up at the park for lunch today."

"Do you really think he'll come?" Lee Ann asked, climbing into the backseat of Nancy's car.

"I don't know," Nancy admitted, "but if he does, I want to be there. I'd like to ask him why he wants so much of Lila's work."

Nancy drove to the park and pulled into the parking lot next to an old green van. The girls piled out of the car and walked to the picnic area nearby. Weather-beaten picnic tables dotted the grassy area, along with large trash barrels and a covered pavilion at one end. Beyond the picnic area, a hill swept down to a large duck pond with a path and park benches around it.

"Let's watch from a distance," Nancy suggested. "I don't want to scare him off."

The girls walked down to the pond and seated themselves on one of the benches. The only other person they could see was an elderly woman who was sitting on a bench on the far side of the pond. She was tossing bread crumbs to the noisy ducks that had gathered around her, demanding a handout.

“I wish I’d brought some bread,” Bess said wistfully. “I used to come here when I was little.”

“You and I came, too, Nancy,” Lee Ann said, “with Mom.” She pointed to the other side of the duck pond. “In fact, there’s the fence you were climbing on when Mom took your picture—the one in the painting, remember?”

“That’s right,” Nancy said, looking in the direction Lee Ann was pointing to. She paused before going on. “Lee Ann, can you tell me a little bit more about the gallery?”

“Sure. What do you want to know?”

“Tell me about Rodney.”

Lee Ann sighed. “Rodney is a very gifted artist.”

“Really?” Bess said.

She nodded. “He came to work for the gallery about a year ago, shortly after Mom hired Annette. At that time, he was very enthusiastic. He loved my mother’s work.”

“Wow,” Bess said, her eyes wide with surprise. “Talk about a personality transformation. This doesn’t sound like the Rodney we met yesterday morning!”

“I know,” Lee Ann replied.

“Is that why he came to work at the gallery?” Nancy asked. “Because he wanted to study with Lila?”

“Yes,” Lee Ann answered. “I think he wanted to be around my mom to learn some technique. Also, I’m pretty sure he thought Mom would be his mentor. You see, it’s hard to break into the art field. Another successful artist can help by contacting dealers who will promote new talent. And Mom *has* helped some. She hangs some of his work in her gallery.”

“So what happened to his enthusiasm?” Nancy inquired.

Lee Ann stared at Nancy a moment before answering. “Rodney wanted to be included in this exhibition on Saturday, but Mom said she didn’t think he was ready. And she’s been so busy getting herself ready for the show that her communication with Rodney has mostly been in the form of bossy orders. You know how Mom can be. Anyway, I think Rodney was

disappointed at Mom's treatment of him at first, and then, downright resentful."

Nancy nodded, turning over in her mind all that Lee Ann had said. Then Nancy glanced up and saw a man and a woman enter the park and walk to one of the picnic tables. She took a small pair of binoculars from her purse and held them up to her eyes.

"Who is it?" Bess asked anxiously, peering over Nancy's shoulder. "The con man?"

Nancy shook her head. "He doesn't even resemble our man." She slipped the binoculars back into her bag.

The sounds of loud quacking came from across the pond. Turning, the girls saw that the old woman had run out of bread, and the ducks were demanding more.

"All gone," the girls heard the woman sing out to her webbed-footed followers. "All the bread is gone now."

Gradually, the noise died down, and one by one the ducks waddled away from the woman and back to the pond.

Nancy turned her attention back to Lee Ann.

"Tell me about Annette," she said. "You say she's been with the gallery a little over a year?"

"That's right," Lee Ann said with a nod. "She came just two months before Rodney joined us."

"She's very pretty," Nancy commented. "Does she have a boyfriend—or is she married?"

"She *was* married. But only about a year, I think. Her husband died shortly before she came to work at the gallery."

"Hmm," Nancy said. "So you never knew him?"

"No. Annette doesn't talk about him very much, either. In fact, she's really pretty quiet about almost everything. She doesn't talk very much about herself or anything other than gallery business." A smile spread across Lee Ann's face, and she added, "But she sure knows what's going on at the gallery. She's very organized."

"What about her parents? Are they living?" Nancy asked.

"I don't think so," Lee Ann said. She scratched her forehead thoughtfully. "You know, this is funny. I didn't realize until just

now how little I really know about Rodney and Annette. What goes on in their personal lives, I mean.”

Nancy nodded. She couldn’t help wondering if it was just a coincidence—or if Rodney and Annette had something to hide. Nancy had been watching the elderly woman as she thought, and now an idea came to her.

She rose quickly from the bench. “Let’s talk to the woman across the pond,” she said. “Maybe she can help us.”

Bess and Lee Ann followed Nancy around the pond. When the old woman saw them approaching, she gave them a warm smile.

“Hello, girls,” she said in a kindly, singsong voice. “I just finished feeding my babies. Did you see how they flocked to me?”

“We certainly did,” Nancy said. “Do you come here often?”

“Oh, my, yes!” the woman told them. “I come almost every day—to take care of my babies. They’re like family, you know. There”—she pointed to a gray- and brown-flecked duck sitting near the willow tree next to the pond—“that’s Millie. That’s what I call her, and she comes whenever I call her by name. Oh, they’re smart, these ducks. They know what’s going on, and they all know their names!”

The woman smiled. “Oh, I’m forgetting myself.” She extended her hand to Nancy. “I’m Agatha Wilson. I live across the street.”

The girls shook her hand and introduced themselves.

“Mrs. Wilson—” Nancy began.

“Call me Agatha, please, dear. Come here and sit down.” She patted the bench next to her, and Nancy sat down. Bess and Lee Ann stood next to them.

“Agatha,” Nancy said, “we’re looking for a person who has his lunch here quite frequently. I wonder if you might know who I’m talking about.”

Agatha eyed Nancy curiously.

“He’s about six feet tall,” Nancy continued. “Thin, with a mustache and glasses. He has a rather large, round nose. Does that description sound like anyone you see here frequently?”



“Do you know this man you’re looking for?” Agatha asked. She looked a little wary.

“No. We’re just trying to find him. A little boy told us that the man comes here frequently to have lunch.”

“What little boy?”

“His name is Mike Hawkins,” Nancy said.

“I know him.” Agatha’s eyes lit up, and she smiled. “He helps me feed the ducks sometimes. He’s a rascal, though.”

Nancy smiled politely in return, but she wanted to get back to the subject of the con man. “Do you know who the man is?” she asked.

“No,” Agatha replied. “I haven’t seen anyone who looks like your description.”

“Okay, thanks,” Nancy said. She started to stand up, but the old woman stopped her. “There is a group of young people—a little older than you girls, I’d say—who come here quite often and bring their lunch. Little Michael talks to them whenever he’s here.”

“But none of them looks like the man I described?” Nancy said.

“No, not exactly,” Agatha said. “But then my eyes aren’t what they used to be.”

Agatha gazed off beyond the pond, and the girls took this as their cue to leave. Just as they were saying goodbye, Agatha sat up straighter and pointed.

“There they are!” she said excitedly. “Those same young people I told you about.”

Nancy, Bess, and Lee Ann followed her gaze. A group of four people walked out of the woods at the edge of the park. Nancy judged that they were probably in their twenties. They lingered in the parking lot near the green van that was parked near Nancy’s Mustang.

“Come on,” Nancy urged her friends. “Let’s go see who they are.” She turned to Agatha and extended her hand once again. “Thank you, Agatha. It was nice talking to you, and we appreciate your help.”

“And you, my dear,” Agatha sang out pleasantly. “I hope you find whoever it is you’re looking for.” She winked and added, “I’d think any young man would be delighted to meet some nice young girls like you.”

The girls waved goodbye to Agatha Wilson, then headed quickly around the duck pond, keeping an eye on the four people in the parking lot. They were still about a hundred feet away when the two women and one of the men in the group climbed into the van and started it up. One man was still left standing in the parking lot. He waved to his companions as the van pulled out of the lot.

Nancy ran a few steps and stopped. “Excuse me!” she called out. “Don’t leave yet. I want to talk to you!”

The three people in the van either couldn’t hear Nancy or had no desire to talk to her. They quickly drove out of the lot and down the street.

“Want me to follow them, Nancy?” Bess called out.

“Yes,” Nancy said, tossing her the car keys. “They’re all we have to go on right now.”

The man who hadn’t gone with the others looked up from where he stood in the parking lot. When he saw Nancy, his eyes widened in surprise. She smiled at him, but before she had a chance to say hello, he turned and bolted into the woods.

## *A Serious Threat*

Nancy raced toward the woods.

“Nancy!” screamed Lee Ann. “Don’t follow him—he could be dangerous!”

Nancy didn’t pause or look back. There wasn’t time.

She knew that Lee Ann might be right about the man being dangerous. He didn’t look exactly like the swindler who had come into the gallery the day before, but he certainly seemed to recognize her. He was tall and slender like the con man, and he had the same dark hair. And even more suspicious, he took off when he saw her coming. Why would he run if he hadn’t done anything wrong?

Nancy knew she had to follow him. She raced on, her purse bumping against her side. She reached the edge of the parking lot in a flash and entered the woods at the point where the man had disappeared.

After being in the bright sunlight, Nancy found the woods dark and shadowy, but she could make out a narrow footpath leading into its depths. She headed into the trees, following the path.

As her eyes adjusted to the dimmer light, she saw that the man was up ahead, although barely in sight. He wore a green shirt and was winding quickly through the woods. Sunlight sifted through the greenery, dappling the woods with tricky patterns of light and shadow. If Nancy let the man get too far ahead of her, she wouldn’t be able to see him at all.

She raced after him, trying to focus on the green form bobbing up and down between the trees. Occasionally, the man looked back over his shoulder to see how close she was.

The path led up a slope, and Nancy had to slow a bit. She was in good physical shape, but running uphill while trying to keep the man in sight and ducking the low-hanging branches around her head proved to be hard work. Luckily, the man also slowed his pace.

Suddenly Nancy felt her foot catch on something. Lurching forward, she fell to her knees. She'd been watching the man so intently that she hadn't seen the tree root. There was no time to check for cuts or bruises. Quickly, she scrambled to her feet and kept going. Now the man had a long lead on her.

Where *was* he?

Nancy slowed on the path and peered ahead. The man had disappeared. There were plenty of places where he could have hidden himself. Had she run past him? Was he watching her from a distance? Or had he decided to be the pursuer and go after her? She shivered at the thought.

"Okay," Nancy called out. Her heart was beating hard, but her voice sounded calm and strong.

"Okay," she repeated, louder this time. "I don't know who you are or why you ran away. I just want to talk to you."

No answer. Just the soft rustling of tree branches in the breeze.

"Are you there?"

Still no answer.

Nancy stood as quietly as she could. She could smell the sweet fragrance of the forest, the pine needles along the path, the moist earth underneath the dense undergrowth. Ordinarily, she enjoyed being in the woods, but today they were eerie and chilling. Nancy shook herself, trying to rid herself of the haunting feeling that the man could be stalking *her* now.

That's enough, she thought. Bess and Lee Ann were waiting back in the parking lot. She had to find the man and talk to him.

Carefully, Nancy began to walk farther into the woods. She didn't remember exactly where this pathway led, but she had a vague recollection that it curved toward the back of the park and opened out near the Ferris wheel and merry-go-round.

She stayed alert to the sights and sounds around her and watched carefully for a flash of moving green—the man’s shirt. A squirrel chattered at her from a tall tree, but she didn’t hear anything else. Nancy kept moving.

The farther Nancy walked into the woods, the more discouraged she became. She didn’t see any sign of the man. He must have gotten away. But where?

Nancy rounded a sharp bend in the footpath and came out into a large clearing. Squinting into the bright sunlight, she saw the Ferris wheel towering above her. It was standing still now, waiting for new riders to board. Beside it, the merry-go-round whirled around and around, its calliope music blaring from a speaker overhead. It was nearly filled with adults and young riders, all obviously enjoying the ride.

Nancy frowned. She’d never find the man now. She strolled past the Ferris wheel, then stopped to lean against a tree and watch the merry-go-round. The horses, moving up and down, traveled around the circle quickly, the colors of their manes and saddles and bridles blurring as they whirled by.

As she watched, Nancy’s eye caught a flash of green next to one of the inside horses. She straightened, immediately alert.

She wasn’t sure it was the man, but she didn’t want him to notice her. Nancy slipped behind the ticket booth. If it *was* the man and he saw her, he would just run away again and she might lose him for good.

Nancy waited until the merry-go-round came full circle. A dark-haired man was nearly hidden behind a pair of blue horses. As he peered over the horses’ backs, Nancy got a good look. It was him!

Nancy rushed around to the front of the ticket booth and said, “One for the merry-go-round, please.”

The elderly man in the booth took her money and slid a purple ticket at her under the glass window.

Nancy hurried around to the other side of the merry-go-round, behind the snack building. She wanted to slip onto the ride before the man realized she was there.

The merry-go-round continued to turn. She noticed a spot where she thought she could step on without injuring herself, and the next time it came around, she hopped on, reaching for the metal pole next to her.

Grabbing hold of the wooden tail of the horse in front of her, she pulled herself forward until she could reach the next metal pole. She kept moving slowly toward the horse upon which the man was sitting.

Finally she was right behind him. He obviously thought she was still in the park and was scanning the grounds for a glimpse of her.

Just then, the merry-go-round began to slow. Clapping the man on the shoulder, Nancy shouted above the loud music.

“I just want to talk to you. Please!”

The startled man leapt from his horse, breaking free of her grasp. He jumped from the ride to the ground.

Nancy followed close behind as he circled back around the snack booth. He shot around the corner to the side of the booth, and when Nancy rounded the corner behind him, he was gone. She'd lost him again.

Was he behind the building now, Nancy wondered, or had he run in another direction?

She ran behind the snack booth—and stopped. No one was there. The woods were several feet away. Nancy peered into the trees, struggling for a glimpse of the runaway man, but could see nothing.

Then, as she stood debating whether to chase after him, a hand reached from behind her and clamped over her mouth!

## 6

### *False Scent*

Nancy was jerked backward. She was unable to see her attacker's face.

"Back off!" the attacker whispered ferociously into her ear. "You hear me? If you want to stay healthy, mind your own business!"

Nancy felt herself being shoved to the ground. When she turned around, the man was gone.

Scrambling to her feet, Nancy ran toward the woods and stopped at the edge of the trees. There was no sign of the man. She'd never catch him now.

She walked back through the woods, taking the path that she'd followed from the parking lot. Her mind was filled with questions. Was the man in the park the same man who had swindled Lee Ann? Why had he run away from her? And why was he so desperate that he had to threaten her?

A few minutes later, Nancy walked out into the clearing at the edge of the parking lot, where Bess and Lee Ann were waiting.

"Nancy!" yelled Bess when she saw her walking out of the woods. "Are you okay? We've been worried sick!"

Bess and Lee Ann raced over to her.

"What happened?" asked Lee Ann. "We were about to call the police."

"I'm fine," Nancy reassured them. "Really."

"Did you catch up with the guy?" asked Bess.

"Did you talk to him?" Lee Ann asked at the same time.

"I caught up with him, all right," Nancy told her friends, "but I guess you could say *he* did the talking."

“What do you mean?” Lee Ann asked. “Is he the guy from the gallery?”

“I can’t be sure,” Nancy said. “He did resemble the man. Whoever he is, though, he must have something to hide. He certainly didn’t want to be followed or recognized.”

“So what did he say?” Bess asked.

Nancy described her pursuit of the man through the woods, how she caught up to him at the merry-go-round, and what he said when he grabbed her behind the snack booth.

“Oh, Nancy!” cried Lee Ann, “I don’t like this. He sounds dangerous!”

“Well, he doesn’t want to answer any questions, that’s for certain,” Nancy said.

“Maybe you’d better stop the investigation,” Lee Ann said. A worried frown creased her brow. “We’ll talk to my mother and call the police. If you were hurt, I’d never forgive myself—”

“No,” Nancy cut in, “not yet, anyway. Let’s see what develops. Today’s incident has made me even more determined to get to the bottom of this case. I don’t know what’s going on yet, but I’m sure going to find out.”

Nancy turned to Bess. “Did you follow the van?”

Bess nodded. “I followed them about a mile down the road to the Applause Dinner Theater.”

“They stopped there?” Nancy asked. “At the theater?”

“Yeah. They pulled into the parking lot and went inside. I don’t think they had any idea they’d been followed. I heard them talking in the parking lot—something about how good the show’s been going after some rocky rehearsals. I doubt if they even heard you yell at them before they left the park.”

“Did you go inside?” Nancy asked.

“Only into the box office,” Bess told her. “The play being performed now is a melodrama. You know, where the audience hisses and boos at the villain and applauds the hero.”

“Oh, yes, I remember Annette saying she’d seen the play,” Lee Ann said. “She really loved it.”



Nancy thought for a moment. “The man I chased into the woods has lunch regularly in the park with these people,” she said. “So most likely, he’s a friend of theirs or he has some connection with the theater, either as an actor, stagehand, or management person.”

Lee Ann looked worried. “We didn’t learn much today, did we? Time is flying by so quickly—the exhibition is only three days away!”

“Well,” Nancy said, “we at least have something to go on now. When I followed the man in the park, he ran and then he threatened me. He wouldn’t have done that if he didn’t have a part in the con. We can’t be positive yet that he was the con man, but he certainly looked similar to the man in the gallery yesterday.”

“So what do we do next?” asked Bess.

Nancy grinned. “You always did like show biz, Bess. How about the three of us taking in a little theater tonight? A little melodrama?”

• • •

At five forty-five that evening, the three girls were en route to the Applause Dinner Theater in Nancy’s blue Mustang.

“Dinner is served at six?” Nancy asked Bess. “And the play begins at seven-thirty?”

“Right,” Bess confirmed. “You know, Nancy, a night at the theater is exactly the kind of detective work I love!”

Nancy chuckled. “I thought you might like it.”

“I just hope we’re not wasting our time,” Lee Ann added.

Nancy pulled into the parking lot at the Applause Dinner Theater. The building was a large wooden structure, which stood tallest at the far end and sloped downward toward the parking area.

“Look over there,” Nancy said, pointing to the corner of the lot. “The green van.”

Sure enough, it was the van they’d seen earlier at the park. It stood next to the theater in a section of the lot marked

Personnel.

“This might prove to be a very interesting evening,” Nancy said. “Come on, let’s go.”

The girls went inside, bought their tickets at the box office, and entered the theater. They found themselves in an enormous, square room. The stage area was at the far end of the room and projected out into the sea of tables. People had already arrived for dinner, and nearly half the tables were filled. The air buzzed with the chatter of the audience.

“Look at these tables!” Bess said. “They’re set so elegantly. The linen tablecloths and napkins, the fresh flowers and candles on the tables—”

“May I see your tickets?” an usher said in a nasal voice, coming up behind them. She examined the tickets the girls held out. “Your table is down this way. Will you please follow me?”

The usher led the girls to a table at the right of where they’d entered, near the back wall. The tables were arranged on small risers so that even from the back the stage was clearly visible.

“These are good seats,” Nancy said to Bess and Lee Ann as they sat down. “We’re about as unobtrusive here as we can be. If the con man *is* here, maybe he won’t notice us.”

The girls looked over the menus. There were three entrees to choose from: baked chicken, fried sole, or lasagna. Nancy and Lee Ann decided on the baked chicken, and Bess chose the lasagna.

By the time their dinner was served, most of the tables had filled up. The girls dug into the food with gusto.

“No wonder this place is such a hit,” Lee Ann said, taking a bite of her chicken. “If the play is as good as the dinner, they’ve really got something here.”

By seven-fifteen, the waiters and waitresses were scurrying around, clearing tables to get ready for the show. The room was filled with animated talk and laughter; the rest of the audience appeared to be having as good a time as Nancy, Bess, and Lee Ann.

Promptly at seven-thirty, the lights dimmed and faded to black.

Nancy watched carefully for the man she'd seen at the park. The theater host came out first and informed the audience that there were appropriate responses to each of the three leading characters. When the sweet heroine appeared, the audience was to sigh audibly. The host led the audience in a practice "Ahhh."

Next came the hero. The audience was to cheer and applaud him. Finally, they were expected to boo and hiss the villain.

"All right," said the host with a grin. "Now that you all know how to behave during our play, we'll let the show begin."

Bess turned and grinned at Nancy. "As I said, this is the kind of detective work I like!"

Nancy nodded. So far she hadn't seen the mystery man. There was nothing to do but sit back and keep watching.

The play began. The sweet heroine was introduced first. She was pretty with blond ringlets all over her head. Her dress had pink lace at the sleeves and collar, and she wore white shoes. The audience knew that the appropriate response was to sigh audibly, and they did. She was a poor girl and she couldn't afford to pay her rent.

Bess leaned over to Nancy. "If she's so poor, how come she can afford those fancy, lacy dresses?"

Nancy laughed softly and shrugged.

Then it was time for the villain's entrance. He came out dressed in a long, flowing black cape over a three-piece suit. The audience booed and hissed.

"Sweet Carrie," he said in a low, gravelly voice, "I won't throw you out of your house if you marry me."

The audience booed some more.

Carrie fainted, and the villain laughed wickedly.

"Did women ever really faint like that?" Bess whispered. "What wimps!"

Nancy laughed. It *was* overdone, but that was what made the play so entertaining.

The hero, Lance Goodman, made his entrance, and the audience cheered and applauded.

"Don't worry, Sweet Carrie," said the hero. "You don't have to marry that fiend. *I'll* take care of *him*!"

The audience cheered some more.

Nancy looked over at Bess and saw that her friend was completely drawn into the action. She was staring at brave Lance with sparkling eyes.

"They cast the right guy for the hero," Bess said. "He's so tall, dark, and handsome!"

The play was a success as far as the rest of the audience was concerned, too. Everyone in the theater seemed to be caught up in the action.

Nancy kept going back to the hero. There was something about him. . . . She studied his features carefully. When he exited, she leaned over to Lee Ann. "Does the hero, Lance, look familiar to you?" she asked.

"Not particularly," Lee Ann said, turning from the stage to look at Nancy. "Why? Do you think he's the con man?" she asked.

"Look at him carefully the next time he comes out again," Nancy said.

Within ten minutes, the hero entered the stage again. Lee Ann gasped and covered her mouth with her hand.

"I think you're right!" she whispered excitedly. "But I don't know. He still looks a little different. How can we be sure?"

Bess had been watching the play. Upon hearing the whispered conversation between Nancy and Lee Ann, she turned to her friends. "You think *Lance* is the con man?" she asked, incredulous. "No way! He's too good a guy!"

"Lance is just the *character* he's playing, Bess," Nancy told her. "We don't know anything about the actor who's playing Lance."

"He couldn't be a swindler!" Bess protested.

"Because he's so good-looking?" Nancy teased.

Bess opened her mouth to protest but stopped and smiled. "Well, he *is* handsome," she whispered.

Nancy stared again at the actor playing the hero. "Yes," she said thoughtfully. "He really is handsome, isn't he?"

Opening her program, she tipped it into the light so she could read it. "Clark Drummond," she read aloud softly to herself. So that was the real-life name of Lance Goodman.

On stage, Sweet Carrie and Lance Goodman were in the middle of a romantic scene. Sweet Carrie giggled and touched the tip of her finger to the end of Lance's nose, then bashfully looked away.

Nancy sat up in her seat. "That's it!" she exclaimed softly.

Bess and Lee Ann looked at her quizzically, but Nancy merely shook her head and said, "I'll explain later."

When the house lights came up for intermission, Nancy leaned toward Bess and Lee Ann. "I have an idea," she whispered. "Come with me."

She got up from the table and led Bess and Lee Ann through the crowd and out into the lobby.

"Let's go outside," she said. "It'll be more private."

Pushing open the heavy wooden door to the theater, the three girls stepped out into a pleasant summer evening.

"What's going on, Nancy? What's your idea?" Bess asked.

"If I can get into Clark Drummond's dressing room—"

"Clark Drummond?" Lee Ann questioned.

"He's the actor playing Lance Goodman," Nancy explained. "If I can get into his dressing room, I might be able to see if he's the man we're looking for. At least then I'll be sure we're headed in the right direction by investigating our hero."

"But how are you going to get into his dressing room?" Bess asked. "And what are you going to do there?"

"I'll show you," Nancy said. "But right now, we've got to get backstage and hide. Lee Ann, I'm going to ask you to stand guard at Clark Drummond's dressing-room door while Bess and I go in. Okay?"

Lee Ann hesitated. Then, with a nervous smile, she said, "Count me in."

Back inside, the girls took a few minutes to stroll around and get a feel for the layout of the theater. After making their way down an open corridor that stretched around the stage area and tables, they found a ladies' room at the opposite end of the theater from the entrance. Just beyond the rest room was a sign on a door that read, "Employees Only Beyond This Point."

"Perfect," Nancy said. "That must be the backstage area. Act casual."

The girls chatted in low tones and laughed softly, all the while waiting for a moment when the area was clear of people.

"Now," Nancy said. "Quickly. Behind the door."

The girls slipped through the Employees Only door.

Compared with the audience area where they had come from, the backstage area wasn't very attractive. The paint was peeling from the walls, and fluorescent lamps gave off a harsh light.

"Over here," Nancy whispered.

She led them to a large painted backdrop that was leaning against a wall. Scooting behind it, she motioned for Bess and Lee Ann to follow.

They were now hidden except from anyone who happened to peer in from the sides. But Nancy was counting on everyone backstage being very busy preparing for the play's second act.

The girls heard a patter of feet around them then, and a voice called out, "Places, everybody! One minute to curtain!"

"They're about to start Act Two," Nancy whispered.

More soft running steps were heard, and after a few moments, the girls heard the muffled chatter in the audience soften and die away.

"They're starting now," Nancy whispered. "We'll stay here until we hear the audience cheering the hero. When we know he's onstage, we'll move to his dressing room."

"I hope we find it fast," Bess said.

"That's what I was just thinking," Lee Ann said.

The girls waited quietly. It was no more than five minutes later that they heard the audience cheering wildly for the hero.

“Let’s go,” Nancy said. She led the way out from behind the backdrop. “Keep moving and try to look as if you belong here.”

Nancy walked with a resolute stride along the back wall, Bess and Lee Ann close behind her. Props and costumes were scattered everywhere, and they had to step carefully around the clutter. Halfway along the wall they came to a door. Nancy opened it.

The girls found themselves peering down a narrow hall with closed doors up and down the length of it. Four of the doors had pieces of paper taped to them. Leaning over to look at the note on the closest door, Nancy read “Clark Drummond.”

“Bingo!” she whispered. “Lee Ann, you stay here. If you see anyone coming, knock softly on the door.”

“All right.” Lee Ann glanced nervously over her shoulder. “But hurry up, okay? I don’t know what I’ll do if we get caught.”

“We’ll be back before you know it,” Nancy reassured her. “Come on, Bess.”

Nancy eased the door open, and she and Bess disappeared behind it.

The small room smelled of makeup and powder. Several folding chairs had clothes heaped on them. Shoes were scattered around the floor. Against one wall was a dressing table with a lighted mirror. It was strewn with makeup, containers of powder, jars of cold cream, and a box of tissues.

Nancy stood over the makeup table, examining what Clark Drummond used to turn himself into the romantic hero in the melodrama.

Bess stepped up behind Nancy.

“Look at all this stuff,” she said. “I love the smell of theater makeup, don’t you?” She picked up a pair of glasses on the table and put them on. “Ha. There’s no glass in these.”

Nancy watched Bess thoughtfully. That was it! But there had to be more. She turned eagerly back to the makeup table.

Nancy's gaze fell on a small box at the end of the table, and her breath caught in her throat.

"What is it?" Bess asked. "What did you find?"

Nancy held up the box. "Latex," she announced.

"What's it for?"

"Actors apply it to their faces so they can change their features." She turned around to face Bess. "Remember how the con man looked in the gallery yesterday morning?"

"Sure," Bess said.

"Describe him."

"Well," Bess started out, "he was tall, slender, and nice looking."

"Go on."

"He wore a pair of dark-framed glasses," Bess continued.

Nancy held up the pair of glasses that Bess had put on earlier. Bess's mouth dropped open.

"Go on," Nancy coaxed. "Tell me some more about how he looked."

"He had a mustache," Bess said.

Reaching over to the dressing table, Nancy held up a bushy length of dark hair—a phony mustache.

"Wow!" Bess exclaimed. "How did you—"

"Tell me about his face," Nancy urged.

Bess grinned. "Good looking."

"Be more specific."

"What are you getting at?" Bess asked.

"Describe his nose," Nancy told her.

Bess wrinkled her own nose as she tried to remember. "I think it was kind of large, kind of round."

"Right," Nancy said, nodding. "Bigger than Clark Drummond's nose."

"Yes!" Bess said. "You're right. That was the main difference between them."

Nancy picked up the latex. "If Clark Drummond used this latex to create a new nose for himself—"



Bess gasped. "That's it! It *was* Clark Drummond in the gallery! You're absolutely right!"

"That's why Agatha Wilson didn't recognize the description I gave her," Nancy went on. "Drummond was disguised when we saw him in the gallery."

The girls didn't get a chance to discuss Nancy's discovery any further.

At that moment, the dressing-room door opened, and in walked Clark Drummond!

## *Desperate for Money*

Clark Drummond's face was red with fury.

"What are you doing in my dressing room!" he thundered. "You have no right to be in here! *Get out!*"

Lee Ann hurried in behind Drummond.

"Nancy, I'm so sorry," she said frantically. "I didn't have time. He came through the hall door so fast, I couldn't—"

"It's okay, Lee Ann," Nancy said.

"What do you mean, it's okay?" Drummond yelled. "This is a private dressing room! Who *are* you, anyway?"

"Mr. Drummond, my name is Nancy Drew," Nancy began. "I'd like to ask you some—"

"You're trespassing!" he interrupted. "I ought to call—"

"The police?" Nancy broke in. "Is that what you were going to say?"

Clark Drummond began to look uncomfortable. "Yes," he said, but his voice was a little more defensive than angry now. "After all, you have no right to be in here."

She stared at him coolly. "Go ahead, Mr. Drummond," she said. "That's an excellent idea. In fact, I was about to call in the authorities myself. I suggest that you pick up the nearest phone and call them right now. Ask for Chief McGinnis."

Clark Drummond's face turned from red to purple. He could be dangerous, Nancy thought to herself. She was glad that Bess and Lee Ann were close to the door. But Drummond stood between herself and the only way out.

"If I weren't right in the middle of a show, I would," he said, his voice rising. "But I'm very busy at the moment, so I'd suggest that you get out of here—immediately!"

Nancy decided to press him. He was their only lead. "Mr. Drummond," she said firmly, "before I go I'd like to get some answers from you."

"Answers! About what?" Drummond said angrily. "I certainly don't owe *you* anything!"

"You owe all of us a lot of answers, Mr. Drummond. Especially Lee Ann Cramer." Nancy lifted her chin in Lee Ann's direction. "For instance, why were you in the Cramer Gallery yesterday? Why did you con my friend Lee Ann out of all of her mother's paintings? Why did you run when I tried to talk to you this afternoon in the park? And why did you grab me and threaten me, telling me to back off my investigation and mind my own business?"

Clark Drummond's eyes grew wide, first with surprise, then fear, but only for a moment. He blinked, straightened himself up, and said calmly, "I don't know what you're talking about."

He's quite an actor, Nancy thought. But she'd caught his first reaction, and she was sure he knew exactly what she was talking about.

"Oh, I think you do," she countered.

"I've never been in the Cramer Gallery," Drummond said.

"You were there yesterday," Nancy said. "Yesterday morning."

Drummond shook his head.

Lee Ann cried out softly. Nancy could see the frustration and fear on her face and was glad when Bess put a hand on Lee Ann's shoulder, giving her the only comfort she could.

Nancy turned to the makeup table and picked up the eyeglasses.

"Mr. Drummond, would you put these on, please? We'd like to see what you look like wearing these phony glasses."

Clark Drummond shifted his weight nervously from one foot to the other. "Why should I?" he demanded, but his voice was softer, less sure.

Picking up the phony mustache, Nancy held it out to him. "And this? Would you put this on, too?"

Lee Ann gasped. "That's him! It *was* Drummond at the gallery yesterday! Nancy, you're absolutely right! He disguised himself!"

Drummond stared angrily at Nancy but said nothing.

Nancy stepped to the end of the makeup table and tapped the box. "And if you put on a latex nose, you'd look exactly as you did yesterday at the Cramer Gallery."

"I use those things in my theatrical roles," Drummond said smoothly, gesturing to the makeup table. "You had no business breaking into my dressing room."

Lee Ann expelled a breath she'd been holding. Stepping in front of Clark Drummond, she demanded, "Why did you cheat me, Mr. Drummond? What did my mother or I ever do to you?"

Clark Drummond's face fell. He shook his head, then collapsed in the metal folding chair next to him. "I didn't want to cheat you," he mumbled into his chest. "It wasn't my idea at all." He raised his head and gazed at Lee Ann. "You seem like nice people."

Nancy studied him a moment. He seemed sincere, but then he was an actor. Was he just trying to get himself off the hook?

"Why did you do it?" Nancy asked him.

"I was hired," Clark said simply. "I received a letter with two hundred dollars. The letter promised much more if I would accept a 'special' acting job."

"So," Nancy said, "you did it for the money?"

Clark looked up at her. "To a nearly starving actor, getting two hundred dollars in the mail is like discovering a gold mine. Sure, I wanted the money."

"So you accepted the job."

Clark nodded. "The letter said I'd get a call later that day to see if I'd accept the job."

Nancy leaned forward. "Somebody called you? A man or a woman?"

"I wasn't sure," Clark answered, shaking his head. "The voice was whispered and low. I couldn't tell."

Nancy eyed Clark suspiciously. "The caller disguised his or her voice?"

"Yes."

Nancy was skeptical. Clark's story sounded awfully farfetched. "What exactly did the voice say?" she asked.

"It told me that I was to create a diversion in the gallery and add words to the contract that would entitle me to all of Lila's paintings," Clark said.

"For the price of *one* painting," Nancy added.

"Right," Clark said.

"And what did you do with the painting you 'bought' and took with you from the gallery?" Nancy asked.

"I was told by the voice that I should take it to the bus station and put it into locker number 330. I was to leave the locker open and get out of the terminal right away."

"And did you do that?" Nancy asked.

"Yes," Clark said.

Nancy looked over at Bess and Lee Ann. "I'm sure it's been picked up by now," she told them, "but we'll check it out."

"And this morning, I received another three hundred dollars in cash in the mail," Clark went on to explain.

Very convenient, Nancy thought. He doesn't know who planned the swindle, and he doesn't have the painting, either. She supposed there was a slight chance he was telling the truth, but his story was pretty unbelievable.

Clark sat up then and looked Nancy squarely in the face. "I'm truly sorry about all of this." He shifted his gaze to Lee Ann. "I wish I could undo what I did."

"At least you're sorry now. That counts for something, doesn't it, Nancy?" Bess asked hopefully.

Apparently, Bess had swallowed Clark's entire story.

"We'll have to see how all this works out," Nancy said noncommittally. "You said you received a letter with the first payment?"

"Yes."

"Do you still have the letter?"

“Yes,” Clark said. He stood and moved to his dressing table. Opening the right-hand bottom drawer, he withdrew a piece of white paper and handed it to Nancy.

She examined the paper, turning it over in her hands. “Just standard lined paper, torn out of a spiral notebook.” She looked up at Clark. “What about the rest of the paintings? When were you supposed to pick those up?”

“The voice said I’d be contacted before the exhibition on Saturday,” Clark said.

Nancy paused, studying Clark’s face. He was acting sorry for what he’d done, but she still didn’t know whether or not to believe his unusual story. She looked sternly at him. “Will you let me know if you get another phone call or any more notes?”

“Of course,” Clark said.

“Here’s my number.” Nancy scribbled her phone number on a scrap of paper she’d dug out of her purse. “I’ll be in touch.”

There was a knock on Drummond’s dressing-room door, and a female voice called out from the hall, “Your cue’s coming up, Clark. You ready?”

“In a minute,” Clark called back. He turned to the girls. “You’ll have to excuse me now. I have to make a quick costume change.”

“Of course,” Nancy said. “Go and rescue Sweet Carrie.”

The girls turned to go, but Clark called them back.

“I’ll tell you something, Nancy Drew,” he said. “If I were in trouble, I’d sure want you on *my* side!”

## *Starting Over*

Nancy didn't sleep well that night. Tossing and turning, she kept thinking about Clark Drummond's story. If he didn't plan the con himself—and Nancy wasn't sure whether or not she believed that—then who *did* mastermind the plot to ruin Lila?

Could it have been Jennifer Williams, Lila's chief rival? Or bitter Rodney? They seemed to be the most likely suspects at the moment. But, Nancy resolved, she wouldn't forget about Clark Drummond. He certainly was someone to keep an eye on. And she still had to question Annette, too.

The next step, she decided just before she finally drifted off to sleep, was to pay a visit to Jennifer at the Red Door Gallery. Maybe she'd learn something useful. Yes, she'd stop by there tomorrow.

In the morning, Nancy drove across town to the Red Door Gallery. She pulled her sports car into the lot next to a modern brick-and-glass building with a brightly painted red front door. A one-stall garage, its door closed, stood next to the lot. Nancy noted that although the hour was early, half a dozen cars were parked in the lot already.

Impressive, Nancy thought. Evidently Jennifer *was* doing a good business. Could the rivalry between Jennifer and Lila be strong enough that Jennifer might want to destroy her competitor? Or at least eliminate her from the upcoming exhibition?

Nancy mused over the question as she walked up the sidewalk and opened the gallery's red door.

Inside, Nancy found that this gallery was about the size of Lila Cramer's but was very different in style. Instead of using

antiques to create a quiet, restful atmosphere, as the Cramer Gallery did, the Red Door Gallery was decorated with starkly modern leather-and-chrome furniture. Several groups of people were browsing, looking at the works of art displayed on the wall, and making quiet conversation. Many of the paintings and sculptures were abstract pieces.

A heavyset woman with an attractive, friendly face and red hair approached Nancy.

“Hello,” she said. “May I help you?”

“Are you Jennifer Williams?” Nancy asked.

The woman laughed. “I wish I were—I can’t paint worth beans. No, I’m Cathy Stark. I work for Jennifer.”

Nancy held out her hand and introduced herself. “This is a lovely gallery,” she said. “It’s very different from the Cramer Gallery, isn’t it?”

Cathy’s smile faded. “Yes, yes, it is. Much different.” Then she added, “And much better, I think.”

Nancy nodded. “You certainly must be doing well. I’m impressed to see so many people here this morning.”

“We *are* doing very well,” Cathy said, and Nancy caught the note of pride in her voice. “Especially in the last year or so.” She looked questioningly at Nancy. “Do you know Lila Cramer, by any chance?”

“Actually, I’m a friend of Lee Ann’s, Lila’s daughter,” Nancy explained.

“I see,” Cathy said. “Lee Ann’s a sweet girl.”

Nancy studied Cathy’s wide face. The young woman had been careful not to say anything nice about Lila, and Nancy detected an air of rivalry. She wondered just how loyal Cathy was to Jennifer Williams. Loyal enough to want to see Lila fail?

“I’d like to see some of Ms. Williams’s paintings,” Nancy said. “I’ve heard she’s very talented.”

“Indeed she is!” Cathy said. “Follow me.”

She led Nancy to a collection of watercolors on a nearby wall.

“These are all Jennifer’s work,” Cathy said, making a sweeping gesture with her hand. “They’re beautiful, aren’t



they?”

“They certainly are,” Nancy agreed.

Jennifer Williams also painted landscapes in watercolors, but her style was different from Lila’s. Lila’s colors were transparent and muted, but Jennifer painted with darker, bolder colors, and her edges were crisper. Nancy truly didn’t prefer one style over the other. She would have liked to own paintings of each artist.

As she looked at Jennifer Williams’s watercolors, Nancy thought about Cathy’s reaction to the mention of Lila Cramer. One thing was sure. She needed to find out more about Jennifer Williams and Cathy Stark.

“Do you know Lila Cramer?” Nancy asked casually, still gazing at the paintings on the wall.

When Cathy didn’t answer right away, Nancy turned to face her.

“Yes,” Cathy said slowly. She was speaking with great care. “Yes, I do know her, but not well.”

Nancy decided to be direct. Maybe then Cathy wouldn’t be so cautious. “Does Lila ever come in here to check out her competition?”

“No way!” Cathy cried. “Lila Cramer wouldn’t set foot in this gallery.”

“Why not?” Nancy pressed.

“Because Jennifer is making a name for herself,” Cathy huffed proudly. “She’s a threat to Lila, and Lila can’t take it. She can’t stand knowing that one day Jennifer will have the recognition and respect that Lila has now.”

“In other words, she might become the star that Lila is now,” Nancy said.

“Right,” Cathy said with a decisive nod.

“Isn’t there room for a lot of stars?” Nancy asked.

“Of course,” Cathy answered. “But tell that to Lila Cramer! According to her, she is the *only* star in this part of the country. And she wants to keep it that way.”

Nancy nodded. What Cathy said was true enough, but it wasn't shedding any new light on the case. "Well, Jennifer Williams is certainly a very talented lady," she said. "Is there any chance that I might meet her?"

Cathy hesitated before she spoke. "I think she's available," she said. "She's been very busy preparing for an upcoming exhibition, but you probably know about that since you're a friend of Lee Ann's."

"Right," Nancy said.

"I'll see if she can come out here and meet a new fan," Cathy said with a grin. "Wait right here."

She disappeared and within a minute returned with a very pretty woman. She was about Lila's age but smaller, with long, dark hair.

"I'm Jennifer Williams," the woman said, extending her hand to Nancy.

"Hi," Nancy said. "I'm Nancy Drew. I was just admiring your work."

"Thank you," Jennifer said with a gracious smile. "I'm glad you like it." She glanced quickly at Cathy, then added, "I hear you're a friend of Lee Ann Cramer."

"Yes, that's right," Nancy told her. "I've known Lee Ann and her mother for many years."

Jennifer kept her smile frozen in place. "Yes, so have I," she said. "Lila and I used to be dear friends, but, well, I don't see so much of her now."

Nancy nodded. "The art world can be very competitive, I guess," she said.

"Not necessarily," Jennifer said, "but it seems to be in River Heights." She smiled ruefully. "The artistic temperament is a thing to behold."

Nancy watched Jennifer's face closely. She looked almost sad. "Are you talking about yourself, Jennifer?" she asked.

Jennifer appeared surprised by the question. "Yes, I guess so," she said. "And Lila."

"So you and Lila don't get along?" Nancy pressed gently.

Jennifer looked Nancy straight in the eye and said, "I think it would be accurate to say that Lila and I detest each other."

Nancy was startled by the harsh statement. She could see where Cathy had gotten her attitude about Lila.

"That's a pretty strong word, 'detest,'" she said to Jennifer.

Jennifer shrugged. "As I said, it's accurate. Lila used to be a wonderful colleague but now thinks she's more important than anyone else." She jabbed the air with her index finger to make a point. "But someday, someone will come along and take Lila down a peg or two. Mark my words."

Jennifer hadn't bothered to hide the anger in her words. Was she angry enough to want to see Lila and her gallery destroyed? Nancy didn't know the answer to that question yet, but she would find out.

Nancy extended her hand and said truthfully, "Well, count me in as one of your admirers, Jennifer. These paintings are beautiful."

"Why don't you come to the exhibition on Saturday?" Jennifer suggested as they shook hands. "I'll be showing some of my best, new work. I think you might be surprised." She eyed Nancy very seriously. "I know Lila will be *very* surprised. I'm looking forward to that."

Nancy studied Jennifer's pretty face. What surprise did she have in mind? Surprisingly good work? Or the ruin of Lila Cramer?

• • •

After she left the Red Door Gallery, Nancy drove back to the Cramer Gallery and parked in the side lot.

Only one car in the lot, Nancy thought. There were six at the Red Door. Maybe Jennifer really *is* competition for Lila. And maybe Jennifer or Cathy hate Lila enough that one of them arranged a swindle through Clark Drummond.

She was still mulling over the question when she pushed open the gallery door and came face-to-face with Rodney.

“Hi,” Nancy said. She looked around but didn’t see either Lila or Lee Ann. This might be a good time to find out more about Rodney, she thought. “How’s business this morning?” Nancy asked casually.

Rodney was dusting the frames of the paintings on the front wall.

“The usual,” he said, shrugging.

“Where’s Lee Ann?” Nancy asked.

Rodney looked directly at Nancy and scowled. “How should I know?” he said. “I’m not her keeper.”

Nancy stared at him. “Why are you so angry, Rodney?” she asked. “Don’t they pay you well enough here?”

Rodney was obviously surprised by the boldness of Nancy’s question. “I’m not . . . angry,” he sputtered.

“Could’ve fooled me,” Nancy said, leaning against the doorway. “Every time I see you, you’re scowling or complaining about something. Usually when people behave that way, there’s a reason.”

Rodney met Nancy’s gaze with a frown. “That’s very perceptive,” he said. “You’re right. There usually is a reason behind an employee’s complaints.”

“So?” Nancy said.

“So what?”

“So what’s yours?”

Rodney scowled at her again.

“So what is *your* reason?” Nancy pressed.

Rodney turned away abruptly and continued to dust.

“I hate that woman,” he said over his shoulder.

“Lila?” Nancy asked.

“Of course, I’m talking about Lila,” he said. “Who could hate Lee Ann? She’s a nice person.”

“You’re right, Lee Ann’s terrific,” Nancy said. “But why do you hate Lila?”

Rodney turned to face her. “Do *you* like Lila?” he asked.

Nancy hesitated. “I think Lila’s a good person,” she said carefully. “She’s just wrapped up in her career so much right

now that she doesn't have time to think about anything else."

"I'd say that was an understatement." Rodney snorted.

"Let me ask you something," Nancy said. "If you feel that way, why are you still working for her?"

Rodney leaned against the wall between two paintings. "I've asked myself the same question over and over," he said, heaving a deep sigh. "Do you know why I came here to work?"

"No," Nancy said.

"I'm an artist," he told her. "I came here to learn a bit about Lila Cramer's technique, how to run an art gallery, and mostly to get connected."

"Connected?"

"Yeah. I thought Lila might introduce me to the right people, you know, help me get my career going."

"And is that happening?" Nancy asked.

"Well, I've learned a lot about dusting," Rodney said sarcastically, "but I'm sure not learning anything about painting! Let me tell you about something that happened shortly after I came to work here. It's a good example of Lila's attitude and ego."

"Okay."

"I'd been working here a couple of weeks and wanted the great Lila Cramer to look at some of my work and give me her opinion and advice," Rodney began. "I was hoping for some encouragement."

Nancy nodded. "That sounds reasonable."

"Do you know how Lila Cramer encourages new artists?" Rodney said, anger brewing in his eyes. "I showed her some of my paintings. She barely even glanced at them. She dismissed them with a wave of her hand. There's no emotion here, Rodney,' she said." Rodney mimicked Lila's voice as he spoke. "That's it. That was my encouragement; that was my advice. 'There's no emotion here, Rodney.' Then she shoved the painting back in my hand and walked away."

"I can see why you feel disappointed," Nancy said sincerely. "That must have been crushing."

Rodney stared over Nancy's shoulder and set his jaw angrily, as if he were remembering his humiliation.

"I'll show her emotion," he mumbled under his breath, his fists clenched. "I'll show her."

• • •

Nancy pulled her Mustang in front of her house later that afternoon. She'd gone to check out the locker in the bus station where Clark Drummond said he'd left the painting. As she'd expected, locker 330 was empty.

When she pushed open the front door, Nancy heard the telephone ringing in the living room. She raced to pick up the receiver. "Hello?" she said.

No one answered.

"Hello?" she said again.

There was a pause so long that Nancy nearly hung up. But then a whispery voice spoke.

"If you care for—" The rest was unintelligible.

"What?" Nancy said. "I can't hear you."

"If you care for your health," the voice whispered, spitting out the words, "you'll stop your investigation at the Cramer Gallery!"

## *Something Surprising*

“Boy, you sure know how to create suspense!” Bess said, dropping into the passenger seat of Nancy’s car. “Okay, you said you’d tell me what mysterious thing happened yesterday.”

“I had a strange phone call,” Nancy said, pulling the Mustang away from the curb.

“From?” Bess prompted.

“Your guess is as good as mine. I couldn’t even tell if it was a man or a woman!”

“An anonymous caller?” Bess asked.

“Right.” Nancy repeated the mysterious caller’s exact words to Bess.

Bess let out a low whistle. “You must be getting close to some answers.”

“Not necessarily,” Nancy said. “But someone is certainly getting nervous. I guess that’s a good sign.”

“I wonder who it could have been?” Bess asked.

“Well,” Nancy said, “at this point, we have several suspects. Clark Drummond, Rodney Walden, and Jennifer Williams.”

“But what are you going to do?” Bess asked, shooting Nancy a worried look. “The caller threatened you! What if that person decided to—”

“Nothing’s going to happen,” Nancy reassured her.

“You can’t be sure, Nancy,” Bess warned. “You better be especially careful from here on in.”

Nancy laughed. “I appreciate your concern, and I *will* be careful,” Nancy said as she slowed to negotiate a sharp curve in the road.

“So, where are we going?” Bess asked, looking up at the row of houses they were driving past. She chuckled. “I guess I’m a pretty trusting friend to jump into your car in the middle of an investigation without even knowing where we’re headed.”

“We’re going to see Annette Hoops this morning,” Nancy said.

“At the gallery?”

“No. At home—it’s her day off. I thought it might be helpful to visit her at her apartment, anyway. She’s pretty quiet. Maybe we can get to know her better if we see her in her own place.”

“Does she know we’re coming?” Bess asked.

“Yes,” Nancy said. “I called her this morning and asked if we could stop by, and she said yes.”

“She seems awfully nice,” Bess said. “Do you think Annette could have something to do with the case?”

“I really can’t rule anyone out,” Nancy told her. “I couldn’t tell whether my caller was a man or a woman. Oh—by the way,” she continued, “I think we have to add another name to the list of suspects.”

Bess turned to Nancy in surprise. “Who?”

“I visited the Red Door Gallery yesterday,” Nancy related all that had happened during her visit. “Jennifer Williams certainly put herself high on the list by telling me that she detests Lila Cramer,” she concluded.

“But she was already on the list, right?”

“Right,” Nancy said. “Along with Clark Drummond and Rodney. But now there’s also Cathy Stark. She works for Jennifer, and she doesn’t like Lila.”

“But how much doesn’t she like Lila?” Bess asked. “Enough to—”

“To pull a con?” Nancy finished the question. “Maybe.”

“Could the two of them—Cathy and Jennifer—have cooked up the plot to ruin Lila?” Bess asked.

“I considered that, too,” Nancy said, nodding. “I suppose it’s possible. I wish I knew how Clark Drummond fits into all of this. His story was pretty crazy.”



"I don't see why you keep mentioning Clark as a suspect," Bess said. There was a dreamy look in her eyes. "Didn't you believe him?"

"Let's just say I think he should be watched," Nancy said. "*Carefully.*"

"Well, *I* thought he seemed like a nice guy," Bess insisted.

Nancy rolled her eyes and smiled.

Pulling a slip of paper out of her pocket, Nancy checked the address of the apartment she was looking for.

"The address is 204 Lincoln Way," she told Bess. "We must be close. Annette said we'd recognize her beat-up jalopy in the parking lot."

"That must be it," Bess said, pointing to an old car sitting at the edge of the lot.

Nancy pulled into the small, crowded parking lot at the back of the old red-brick apartment building.

"Looks kind of shabby," Bess observed.

"Yes, it does," Nancy agreed.

Bess was still staring at the building. "Do you think Annette can't afford anything nicer?" she asked.

"Maybe it's better on the inside," Nancy said optimistically.

The girls climbed out of the car and walked around to the front of the building. Pushing the door open, they entered a small lobby.

A row of mailboxes took up most of the side wall. Nancy scanned the name plates and stopped when she came to *A. Hoops*.

"She's in apartment Two C," Nancy announced.

The girls climbed the stairs to the second floor and found the apartment they were looking for halfway down the corridor. Nancy knocked, and in a few moments the door opened.

"Nancy, Bess, come in," Annette said cheerfully, ushering the girls into the apartment.

Annette was dressed casually in a pair of jeans and a print blouse. "This place is small, but I love it," she said, gesturing to the living room. "It's just my size."

Nancy and Bess sat on the couch that was set into a corner of the room. There was a low table in front of it. Annette sat across from them in a wooden rocking chair. As Nancy looked around the room, she decided that it was very tastefully furnished.

"This is a great apartment," Bess commented. "I love what you've done with it."

"Thank you," Annette said, smiling. "Since I started working for Lila, I've had a little extra money to begin buying some nice furniture—piece by piece." She ran a hand through her dark hair. "Would you two like some tea? I just brewed a pot."

"Yes, thanks, I'll take a cup," Nancy said.

"So will I," Bess said.

Annette got up from the rocking chair and walked into the small kitchen just off the living room.

"Annette," Nancy called to her, "I wanted to ask you some questions about the gallery."

"I thought that might be why you were coming to see me," Annette called back.

"I was hoping you might be able to suggest some possible leads," Nancy said.

"Me?"

"Well, I'm particularly interested in finding out about people who might want to cause trouble for Lila," Nancy said.

Annette didn't answer for a moment. Then she reappeared in the living room with two mugs. Handing them to Nancy and Bess, she returned to the kitchen for her own mug before she sat down in the rocker again. "Well," she said slowly, "Lila is somewhat. . . emotional, you know."

"Yes," Nancy said, nodding encouragement. "Does she make it hard for you?" She blew gently on her steaming tea.

"Oh, not really," Annette said. "It's just her artistic temperament at work. I don't take her outbursts personally."

"Good for you," Bess said, taking a sip from her mug. "I think I'd have a hard time doing that."

"I do feel sorry for Lee Ann," Annette added. "It must be hard for her not to take her own mother's outbursts personally."

“Does Lila have any friends?” Nancy asked.

“Not in the way you mean,” Annette told her. “Oh, she has some friends from the days before her career took off, but she doesn’t go out for lunch or to the movies with them. Usually her lunch and dinner dates are for business purposes. Even when Lila has lunch with Lee Ann, I suspect they’re discussing the gallery.”

“Do you like Lila’s paintings?” Nancy asked.

“Oh, yes,” Annette said, smiling. “Lila is very gifted. She deserves the acclaim.”

A painting on the wall across the room caught Nancy’s eye. She stood up and strolled over to get a better look at it. It was an oil painting of a pond with ducks swimming on it.

“I like this,” Nancy said. “Did you get it at the gallery?”

“As a matter of fact, I painted that,” Annette said.

Nancy leaned in to examine the signature.

“A. Hoops’!” she exclaimed. Then she stepped back again to admire the work. “You’re a very talented artist, Annette.”

Bess stood up and joined Nancy in front of the painting.

“Another talented artist!” she said, grinning. “We’re surrounded!”

Annette beamed with pleasure. “Thank you,” she said. “That particular painting is one of my favorites.”

“It looks like the pond at the River Heights park,” Nancy said.

“You’re absolutely right,” Annette said, obviously pleased.

“Have you been to art school?” Bess asked as she and Nancy sat back down on the couch.

“No. I wanted to go to a rather famous art school—my sister was going to pay my way. But it never worked out.”

“What a shame,” Bess said softly.

Annette shrugged. “So now I work around art and other artists at the Cramer Gallery.”

“You must have had some good teachers, though,” Nancy prodded.

“Well, I guess I’ve always enjoyed hanging around galleries and artists. I picked up a lot just listening to conversations and critiques. And I’ve taken some courses.”

“Have you ever sold your work?” Nancy inquired.

“No,” Annette said. “I’m not sure my work is ready for that.”

“Maybe Lila would sell your paintings through the Cramer Gallery!” Bess said enthusiastically.

Annette let out a little laugh. “I doubt it,” she said. “Lila is pretty critical of other artists.”

“Have you asked her about it?” Nancy asked.

“No,” Annette admitted. “I haven’t been able to bring myself to do that. I guess I’m afraid of being turned down.”

“You won’t lose anything by asking,” Nancy pointed out.

“That’s true,” Annette said. Then she smiled. “I’m glad you girls came over. You really gave me a boost.”

“Any time you need a boost, just call on us,” Bess said. “We’d be glad to come over and admire whatever you have hanging on your walls.”

The girls finished their tea and chatted about artists and paintings a little longer.

“Oh, I wanted to ask you,” Nancy said as she and Bess were getting ready to leave. “Have you ever met someone named Cathy Stark? She works at the Red Door Gallery.”

Annette nodded. “I’ve met her a few times.”

“She seems to be very loyal to Jennifer Williams,” Nancy commented.

“I’m sure she is,” Annette said. “Cathy has only been with Jennifer for a few months, from what I understand, but I think they’ve become good friends.”

“You don’t know Cathy very well, then?” Nancy asked.

Annette shook her head. “No. Why?”

“I was just wondering,” Nancy said. “Just checking out the possibilities.”

Annette looked very impressed. “You certainly are thorough, Nancy. I can see why Lee Ann has so much faith in you.”

“Thank you. But the exhibit is tomorrow and I’m running out of time.”

“I’m sure you’ll work things out,” Annette said.

The girls said goodbye and left the apartment. They didn’t speak until they were in the parking lot behind the building.

“What a shame,” Bess said, sighing. “I wish she could’ve gone to that art school. Annette is so talented.”

“Yes, she is,” Nancy agreed. “Maybe after the exhibition, she’ll get up the nerve to ask Lila if she can show her paintings in the gallery.”

“But Annette is so quiet,” Bess said. “I’m not sure she’ll actually go through with it.”

“Maybe we can suggest it to Lee Ann,” Nancy said. “But we should wait until after the exhibition—and after we get this case wrapped up. I don’t think Lila can focus on anything else at the moment.”

“Right,” Bess agreed.

The girls got into Nancy’s car, and Nancy drove to the exit from the parking lot. There was heavy traffic, and they had to wait while a stream of cars passed by. Finally, Nancy found a space in the traffic and pulled out onto the street.

“How about an early lunch?” Bess suggested. Without waiting for Nancy to answer, she asked, “Where shall we go?”

Nancy laughed. “How about the Hungry Fork? They have wonderful salads.”

“And terrific cheeseburgers,” Bess added. “All greasy and tasty and filling.”

“Not to mention fattening,” Nancy said with a grin.

“So who counts calories?” Bess asked.

“The Hungry Fork isn’t that far away, but in this traffic, it’ll take all afternoon to get there,” Nancy said, checking her rearview mirror. “It’d be faster to take the highway and approach it from the back.”

“Right,” Bess said.

Nancy made a right at the next stop light, glancing in her rearview mirror again as she turned the wheel. Something she

saw in the mirror caught her gaze.

“Bess,” she said, “don’t look now, but I think we’re being followed.”

Bess gasped. “You’re kidding!”

“I noticed a red sedan behind us before,” Nancy told her. “It’s still there. The driver is wearing sunglasses and a hat pulled low over his eyes. I can’t tell who it is.”

Bess turned in her seat and looked at the red sedan. It was about three car lengths behind them. “I don’t know who it is, either,” she said.

“I’m going to try something,” Nancy said.

She slowed the car to about five miles per hour below the speed limit. The other car immediately slowed, too, keeping a safe distance behind.

“Hmm,” Nancy said. “I think I’ll drive around the block, just to make sure.”

She made a right turn, and the red car followed. She made another right turn, and again the car followed. After two more right turns in a row, Nancy and Bess had no doubt that the red car was tailing them.

“Who could that be?” Bess asked, turning in her seat to take another look at the red sedan.

“I don’t know, but now that person knows that we’re on to him,” Nancy said. “I wonder who’s so interested in where we’re going?”

“And why,” Bess added.

“Right. Let’s try to lose this guy,” Nancy suggested. She pulled onto the highway that ran in a wide arc around the edge of River Heights. Keeping to the right lane, she accelerated to the fifty-five-miles-per-hour speed limit.

The red sedan did the same. After a few seconds, the red car pulled up closer behind Nancy.

“What’s going on?” Bess asked, watching the car in the right side mirror.

“I don’t know,” Nancy said. “I hope you’ve got your seat belt fastened.”

“I put it on back in the parking lot,” Bess assured her.

“Good. This could get a little hairy.”

The red car pulled up to the left as if it was going to pass. Then, with a sudden motion, it swerved right, slamming into Nancy’s car.

Bess screamed as the Mustang careened to the right and screeched onto the shoulder. “He’s trying to run us off the road!”

“Hang on!” Nancy yelled. The car was bouncing wildly on the rough gravel, toward the metal guard rail. Just in time, Nancy yanked the steering wheel hard to the left, and both girls were jostled as the Mustang righted itself on the road.

The red car stayed at the left rear of Nancy’s car so that neither of the girls could get a good look at the driver. Again, the sedan moved into the side of Nancy’s sports car and roughly pushed the girls farther to the right.

Nancy was prepared. When her front wheels ran off the pavement and onto the gravel shoulder, she acted swiftly to turn the Mustang left. The car lurched back onto the highway again.

“Nancy, what are we going to do?” Bess wailed.

Nancy’s concentration was focused on keeping the car under control. Her knuckles were white from gripping the steering wheel so tightly. Obviously, whoever was in the red sedan wasn’t about to give up easily.

“Can you see the license number?” Nancy yelled.

Bess craned her neck to see the car at their side.

“It’s covered with dirt,” she said. “I can’t read it.”

“Of course,” Nancy said, frowning. “Whoever is behind us was planning to do this.”

The red car came up behind the girls again with even greater speed. This time, it slammed so hard into Nancy’s Mustang that she was thrown against the car door, and her grip loosened on the steering wheel!

Bess screamed as Nancy’s car left the road, heading straight for the metal railing!

## *An Artistic Temperament*

Nancy slammed on the brakes and clutched at the steering wheel. Gripping it tightly, she pulled to the left as hard as she could. She only barely missed crashing into the barrier.

Nancy slowed the car gradually. Again the red car behind them sped up, but instead of hitting the Mustang, it roared past them on the left. Nancy turned, trying to get a look at the driver, but the person had slunk low in the seat and yanked the hat even lower.

Nancy pulled carefully onto the shoulder and stopped the car. Breathless from their harrowing ride, she and Bess sat in silence, watching the back of the red sedan disappear into the distance. The traffic was slow on the highway at this time of day. They hadn't seen a single car during the short time the red sedan had tried to run them off the road. For several more minutes, there were no other vehicles in sight.

Nancy spoke first. "Did you see the driver's face at all?" she asked.

"No," Bess said. She reached up and drew a strand of blond hair behind her ear, and Nancy saw that her hand was trembling.

"Neither did I," Nancy said.

"We could have been killed," Bess whispered.

"That's true," Nancy said. "Whoever was driving that car wants to scare us off the case."

"Well, he ought to be extremely pleased with himself," Bess said. She was still shaking. "I was about as scared as I've ever been."



“That was the purpose of the phone call I received yesterday, too,” Nancy said.

“Somebody sure does want you to stop your investigation,” Bess said.

“No way,” Nancy declared.

“If this was my case, I’d say, ‘Oh, well, Lila can always paint a few more pictures—’”

Nancy laughed. “No, you wouldn’t! And I’m not giving up, either.” She paused. Her mind was racing as she tried to fit together all the pieces of the case so far. “I’m just wondering which of our suspects is most likely to pull a stunt like that. I don’t know which of them owns a red car.”

“Me either,” Bess said.

Nancy turned to Bess. “Are you still hungry?”

Bess laughed. “Can you believe it? I kind of lost my appetite.”

“Me, too,” Nancy said. “How about if we stop and catch our breath at my house for a bit? Maybe in a little while we’ll be ready for lunch, and we can fix it ourselves.”

“Fine by me,” Bess said.

Nancy put the car in gear and pulled out onto the highway. When the girls arrived at Nancy’s house a little while later, they found Hannah making a peanut butter, honey, and banana sandwich for herself.

“Remember when I used to make these for you, Nancy?” Hannah asked.

“They were my favorites,” she said. “How about if we join you? Have you gotten your appetite back yet, Bess?”

Hannah gazed with concern at Bess. “What’s wrong, Bess?” she asked. “Aren’t you feeling well?”

“Of course I am, Hannah. But Nancy and I had a scary experience this morning.”

Hannah looked worriedly from Nancy to Bess and back to Nancy again. “What happened?”

Nancy told Hannah about the red sedan and the wild ride they’d taken before being forced off the road.

“My word!” Hannah exclaimed. “That person must be very worried that you’re going to expose him as being responsible for the scam.”

“That’s what I thought,” Bess said with a nod. “Nancy must be on the right track.”

“I guess you’re right,” Nancy agreed.

“Just be very careful, girls,” Hannah said.

Nancy and Bess made sandwiches for themselves and ate them along with some of Hannah’s homemade vegetable soup. By then, they were feeling a lot calmer. After leaving the house and climbing back into Nancy’s car, they headed for the Cramer Gallery.

“Are you going to tell Lee Ann what happened to us this morning?” Bess asked.

“Yes, she should know what’s going on,” Nancy said.

When Nancy and Bess arrived at the gallery, they caught a glimpse of Lila in the back office. They didn’t see Lee Ann, so they strolled around the gallery for a while.

Minutes later, Rodney walked through the doorway. “I wonder why Rodney’s arriving now?” Nancy whispered to Bess.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Bess asked.

Nancy nodded. “You’re wondering if Rodney was the driver of the red car?”

“Maybe he went home to wash the dirt from the license plate.”

“Or switch cars,” Nancy said.

She and Bess approached the young man.

“Hi, Rodney,” Nancy said.

“Hello,” he said curtly. He brushed by the girls and headed into the back office, where Lila was.

“Friendly guy,” Bess whispered sarcastically.

“You said it,” Nancy agreed. “Come on, let’s go check the parking lot. Maybe Rodney parked a red car outside.”

As the girls headed for the door, they could hear Lila speaking to Rodney in the back office.

"A bit late, aren't you?" Lila's voice drifted out into the gallery.

With a hand, Nancy stopped Bess and motioned for her to be silent. Both girls eased behind a large easel and listened to the conversation in the office.

"I guess I am," they heard Rodney say airily.

"Emergency?" Lila asked.

"Nope."

"Well, whatever it was, it must have been pretty important to prevent you from getting to work on time," Lila said, sounding angrier.

"I had things to do," Rodney said.

"Things?" Lila said in her shrill voice. "What sort of things?"

"What I do on my own time is *my* business, Lila," the girls heard Rodney answer. "You can run everything inside this small gallery and maybe in a small portion of the art world. But outside of the Cramer Gallery, my life is none of your business!"

"It *is* my business if you're late to work!" Lila cried. "I pay you well to work for me and—"

"You're going to fire me, Lila?" Rodney said. His voice was soft now, in perfect control. "Go ahead and fire me. I really don't care."

When Lila spoke, her voice sounded tense, as if she were speaking between clenched teeth. "I'd fire you this second if there weren't so much to do before the exhibition. Your job is to catalog the paintings, get them ready for the show, and help me in the day-to-day business of the gallery—"

"I'd be happy to leave right now, Lila," Rodney said coolly. "In fact, I'll save you the trouble of firing me. I quit."

"If you quit now, young man," Lila said in a deadly serious tone, "I'll see that your work is never shown *anywhere*, do you understand me? I have an important exhibition coming up, and you are not going to ruin it for me! Is that clear?"

"Perfectly."

Rodney strolled out of the office stiffly. Without looking in Nancy and Bess's direction, he disappeared behind one of the

partitions.

Why would Rodney push Lila into firing him, Nancy wondered. She turned to Bess and said in a low voice, "Let's have a look at the parking lot."

The girls walked to the front door. They pushed it open and walked to the far end of the porch.

"Not a red sedan in the bunch," Bess said, looking out over the lot.

"Rodney still could have been driving the car," Nancy reminded her. "That red car might have been borrowed or stolen."

"True," Bess said.

When Nancy and Bess walked back into the gallery, Rodney was waiting on customers, and Lila was behind the desk. Picking up her purse, Lila headed for the door.

She stopped in front of Nancy and Bess and smiled quizzically. "I didn't see you girls here," she said. "I was so angry with—one of my employees that, well . . . never mind. I certainly have been seeing a lot of you girls lately. Did you come to buy another painting?"

"I'd love to buy another painting, Lila," Nancy said, "but we're here to see Lee Ann. It's been great to get acquainted with her again. We let too much time go by—"

"Yes, well, she is very busy these days, what with tomorrow's exhibition," Lila cut in. "But I'm sure she can give you a few minutes." She turned and called out, "Lee Ann! Lee Ann, come out here a minute, will you?" Turning back to Nancy and Bess, she gave a flamboyant wave of her hand. "I'm off to yet another meeting. So long!"

"Goodbye," Nancy and Bess said.

After Lila had left, Bess asked, "Do you get the feeling she doesn't want Lee Ann to spend too much time with us?"

"I think she wants us to know that Lee Ann should be working and not chatting," Nancy said.

"Nancy, Bess," Lee Ann called, coming up behind them. She softened her voice, and asked, "Do you have any news? The

exhibition is tomorrow!”

“Could we talk to you,” Nancy said, “privately?”

“Sure,” Lee Ann said, frowning. “Is something wrong?”

“No, I just want to let you know what’s been going on,” Nancy said, with a pointed look at Rodney.

Lee Ann nodded. She led them into the back office and closed the door.

“I really should stay in the gallery,” Lee Ann said. “It’s been fairly busy today. So tell me quickly. What’s up?”

“We had quite a ride this morning,” Bess blurted out.

Nancy put her finger to her lips and whispered, “I think we’d better keep our voices down, Bess. We don’t know who was in the other car.”

“Sorry,” Bess whispered. “You tell her the story, Nancy.”

“This sounds terrible,” Lee Ann said, looking from Bess to Nancy.

“We talked to Annette this morning at her apartment,” Nancy told Lee Ann. “And on the way home, somebody ran us off the road.”

“Ran your car off the road?” Lee Ann repeated, a horrified expression on her face. “Are you okay? Was anybody hurt?”

“No,” Nancy said. “Fortunately, I was able to control the car—barely—and we stopped before any damage was done.”

“Do you have any idea who was driving the other car?” Lee Ann asked.

“None,” Nancy said. “The driver wore a hat pulled down over the eyes and sunglasses. We couldn’t even tell whether it was a man or a woman.”

“Oh, I’m just so glad you’re all right,” Lee Ann said. “Nancy, I think it’s time to call in the police. I’ll just tell Mom what happened and let her have her fit. Then we’ll try to handle it. This is too harrowing. I don’t want you in any more dangerous situations!”

Nancy held up her hand. “I’m not ready to give up yet,” she said.

“But who would have tried to run you off the road?” Lee Ann wondered.

“Do you know anyone who owns a red sedan?” Nancy asked.

Lee Ann shook her head. “Not that I can think of.”

“We have to find that car,” Nancy said. “We didn’t get the license plate number, though. It was covered with dirt.”

Lee Ann gasped. “You mean—the person was *planning* to run you off the road?”

“Maybe,” Nancy said. “Lee Ann,” she went on, changing the subject, “do you think Rodney is capable of doing something like that?”

Lee Ann thought for a moment. “Rodney? Well, he certainly has a bad temper.”

Nancy looked at Lee Ann with a serious expression. “But do you think he’d go so far as to run a car off the road?”

The door to the office burst open, causing all three girls to jump.

There stood Rodney, his face red with anger.

“Rodney,” Lee Ann cried. “I thought you were up front!”

“So you decided to gossip about me while my back is turned!” he shouted. “You think I’m some kind of criminal or lunatic.”

“No one’s accused you of anything, Rodney,” Nancy said, keeping her cool. “I’m conducting an investigation here. Bess and I were run off the road this morning. Since I don’t know you very well, it was logical to ask Lee Ann—who *does* know you—whether or not it could have been you.”

Rodney grabbed a telephone book from the edge of the desk and hurled it across the gallery, knocking over a lamp sitting on the antique rolltop desk.

Lee Ann gasped and Bess put a hand to her mouth.

“You!” he cried angrily, pointing a finger in Nancy’s face. “You stay out of my life, you hear me? You stay out, or you’ll have more problems than just being run off the road!”

*Friendly Rivals*

Nancy, Bess, and Lee Ann stared as Rodney stalked out of the office.

“He really threatened you, Nancy!” Lee Ann said in a shaky whisper.

“I have to admit,” Nancy said, “Rodney is one of the angriest people I’ve ever met.”

“Boy, did he explode!” Bess said.

Nancy nodded. “I wonder, though, whether someone who was guilty of an art scam would lose his temper that way in front of witnesses.” She turned to Lee Ann. “Lee Ann, may I phone home? I want to see if there’ve been any phone calls for me—anonymous or otherwise.”

“Sure,” Lee Ann said. She pointed to the phone on the office desk. Then she and Bess went back into the gallery.

Nancy dialed her home phone, and Hannah answered.

“There was a message for you,” Hannah said when Nancy asked if she’d received any calls.

“Who was it from?” Nancy asked.

“Let’s see, it’s here by the phone,” Hannah said. “The woman wanted you to return her call. It says, ‘Call Jennifer—the Red Door Gallery.’ She didn’t say what she wanted, but it sounded urgent.”

“Thanks, Hannah.”

“Okay. Dinner’s at six,” she reminded Nancy. “And be careful!”

Nancy laughed. “Right.”

She hung up. Checking her watch, she saw that it was four o’clock. Jennifer might be getting ready to close. She looked up

the number to the Red Door Gallery and dialed it.

The phone was answered immediately by a breathless woman.

“Hello?” Nancy said into the receiver. “This is Nancy Drew. Is Jennifer—”

“This is Jennifer,” the woman said. Nancy could hear the nervousness in Jennifer’s voice over the phone line. “Nancy, could you come over to the gallery right away? I think I can help you solve your case.”

“I’ll be right there,” Nancy said.

She hung up the phone and headed across the gallery toward Bess, who was waiting near the front door. Halfway there, Nancy stopped in her tracks.

Solve the case? How did Jennifer know I was working on a case? I didn’t talk to her about it.

Did Jennifer know about the con at the gallery? Obviously she did. But the question was—who told her? Or did anyone have to tell her? Could she and Cathy have been working together? Did Jennifer hire Clark Drummond to pull the con?

“Bess,” Nancy said in a low voice, “we’re going to the Red Door Gallery.”

Bess looked at her questioningly.

“I’ll fill you in later,” Nancy said.

After saying a quick goodbye to Lee Ann, Bess and Nancy hurried to the car. As they headed to the Red Door Gallery, across town, Nancy told Bess about her phone call to Jennifer.

“What do you suppose she’s going to tell us?” asked Bess.

“I don’t know,” Nancy replied. “This will be interesting. Jennifer knows about the case. I’m really curious about that because Lee Ann swore Rodney and Annette to secrecy.”

“So how do you think she found out?”

“I don’t know,” Nancy said again, “but I’m not going to ask her right away. Let’s see what she has to say first.”

Nancy pulled into the parking lot of the Red Door Gallery. She noticed that there weren’t many cars there this late in the afternoon.



Jennifer was waiting just inside the front door. She greeted Nancy and Bess, then led them to her office in the back of the gallery, passing Cathy Stark on her way.

“Can you take charge for now?” Jennifer said to Cathy over her shoulder. “I’m going to be in the back office. No interruptions, please.”

“Everything all right?” Cathy asked, looking concerned.

Jennifer answered with a soft “mm-hmm” and kept moving to the back of the gallery.

When they were inside the office, Jennifer closed the door firmly behind them.

“Have a seat, Nancy, Bess.” Jennifer gestured to two chairs next to a desk in the corner. “Coffee?”

“No, thank you,” Nancy said, seating herself.

“No, thank you,” Bess echoed.

“I guess I don’t need any, either,” Jennifer said. “I’m nervous enough. Ever since I thought about it and realized who it is you’re looking for.”

“What do you mean?” Nancy asked.

Jennifer sat opposite Nancy on a third metal chair. “I heard about the man who conned Lee Ann at the gallery—”

“Right,” Nancy said, nodding encouragement. She still needed to know *how* Jennifer heard about it.

“Well, I think I can help you.” Jennifer shifted uneasily in her chair.

Why was she so nervous? Nancy wondered. “Go on,” Nancy said.

“Well, of course, there is only one person it could possibly be,” Jennifer said.

“Who is that?” Nancy asked.

“Rodney Walden,” she said. “It *has* to be!”

“Why?” Nancy asked. It was possible that Jennifer was trying to involve Rodney so that she herself wouldn’t be suspected. Still, Nancy mused, Rodney *had* acted strangely.

“He *hates* Lila!” Jennifer exclaimed. “He’d do anything to ruin her.”

Bess nodded. "He does seem bitter toward Lila," she said.

"He *is* bitter!" Jennifer said.

Still, Nancy needed more information. "How do you know Rodney?" she asked.

Jennifer smiled ruefully. "I met him at a gathering of local artists," she said. "He'd just begun working for Lila, and he was very happy with his job and what he thought would be an opportunity to advance his career. But after several months of enduring Lila's temperamental outbursts and poor treatment, he came to me to ask if I would hire him."

So, there's a connection between Rodney and Jennifer, Nancy thought to herself. "And what did you tell Rodney?" she asked.

"That was about six months ago," Jennifer told her. "I couldn't afford to hire him then. You see, the gallery has just started to do well in the last few months or so."

"Was Cathy working for you at the time Rodney came to you asking for work?" Nancy asked.

Jennifer shook her head. "I'm not kidding when I said I couldn't afford to hire Rodney. I couldn't afford to hire *anyone* at that time. I worked days in the gallery by myself, waiting on customers and keeping the books. At night I painted."

"It must have been difficult for you," Nancy said.

"It was exhausting," Jennifer said. "Not that I'm a great financial success now," she went on. "I'm just beginning to reap the rewards of *years* of hard work."

"Yes, but now you can afford to hire help," Nancy said. "Cathy—"

"Oh, yes," Jennifer interrupted. "I hired Cathy just three months ago. She's wonderful."

"She certainly seems to think a lot of you," Nancy said.

"Well, the feeling is mutual," Jennifer told Nancy. "But, as I said about Rodney, I really think he's the person you should be focusing on."

"Is there any particular reason that you think Rodney was responsible for the con?"

Jennifer held up her index finger. “Just wait right there,” she said. “I’ll show you.”

She got up and walked over to a closed door. Taking a key from her pocket, she unlocked the door and swung it open to reveal a closet.

“Here,” Jennifer said, leaning into the closet. “Look what I have here.”

Nancy and Bess stood up, moved to the closet, and peeked in. Nancy’s mouth dropped open.

“Wow!” Bess exclaimed.

There, in front of them, resting on the closet floor, was a Lila Cramer watercolor. It was the country scene that Clark Drummond had taken with him from the gallery!

“Where did you get this painting?” Nancy asked.

“From Rodney Walden,” Jennifer said. “He came here a few days ago and gave it to me. He said he wanted to ‘do me a favor’ and get Lila Cramer’s paintings out of circulation. I was suspicious about how he got it, but I didn’t say anything.”

“Why did you agree to take it?” Nancy asked.

Jennifer shrugged. “I thought if I kept my mouth shut, I could help you solve this case you’re working on.” She paused. “Is this the painting that was taken in the con at the gallery?”

“Yes—yes, it is,” Nancy told her. She decided it was time to ask Jennifer the question that had been nagging at her since she talked with her on the phone.

“Jennifer,” Nancy said slowly, “how did you know about the con at the gallery?”

Jennifer looked surprised. “Well, Rodney told me about it,” she said after a pause. “He marched in here and said that since Lila and I were enemies, he thought I might like to know about it. He said it was ‘the beginning of Lila’s downfall.’”

“But why did you want *me* to know this?” Nancy asked.

“Well,” Jennifer said, “I admit that Lila and I aren’t very friendly anymore. But I still wouldn’t want to see her hurt. Besides, the same thing could happen to me sometime. Do you understand?”

Nancy nodded but didn't say anything. She wasn't convinced that Jennifer was sincere. Could there be another reason she might want to accuse Rodney?

Nancy stood up and extended her hand to Jennifer. Bess, who had remained quiet through most of the conversation, followed suit.

"Well, thank you," Nancy said. "I appreciate your calling me about this. It certainly does make Rodney look guilty."

"Keep in touch," Jennifer said. "I'm curious about how you wrap this up. After all, Lila and I used to be good friends."

"I understand," Nancy said. "I'll let you know."

As Nancy and Bess left the gallery, Nancy was aware that Cathy's eyes were on them all the way to the front door.

"Mind if I take my break now?" Cathy asked Jennifer as the girls reached the door.

"Go ahead," Jennifer answered.

The girls walked out to the parking lot and got into Nancy's car. Nancy turned the ignition key and heard the car roar to life.

She was about to pull away from the gallery when she gazed over to the edge of the parking lot. Jennifer's garage door was open, and there was one car parked inside. Nancy gasped and turned off the ignition.

"What's the matter?" Bess said, alarmed.

"Look at the car in Jennifer's garage," Nancy said.

Bess turned her head and looked in the direction Nancy was pointing.

"That's it, isn't it?" Bess cried.

There, parked in the gallery garage, was a red sedan—identical to the car that had run them off the road!

*Mystery Caller*

Nancy and Bess got out of the car and strolled over to the garage.

"We can't really be sure if it's the same car," Nancy said. "This license plate is clean. We couldn't read the license plate on the car that ran us off the road."

"It sure looks like the same car," Bess said, shaking her head. "And the car's in Jennifer's garage," Bess added. "It must belong to her."

Nancy nodded. "It's beginning to look as if she's involved in this, all right."

The girls walked back over to Nancy's Mustang.

"Could Jennifer and Rodney be working together?" Bess asked.

"And how does Clark Drummond fit into all of this?" Nancy said. "I have to admit, I'm more puzzled than ever. Why would Jennifer show us the painting Rodney had given her if he was working with her?" She thought a moment. "Unless she wants to pin all the blame on Rodney."

Bess shrugged. "Maybe she realizes you're closing in."

"Maybe," Nancy said noncommittally. She stared at the bright red door to the gallery for a moment, then said, "Maybe she's working with Clark Drummond, and she made up that story so we would chase after Rodney instead."

Bess looked bewildered. "What are we going to do?" she asked.

"We'll have to talk to Rodney again. But first, we need some more information."

Nancy walked quickly back to the gallery and peeked in the window. She turned to Bess.

“Jennifer’s with a customer, and Cathy’s on a break,” Nancy said, keeping her voice low. “Let’s go into the gallery. Keep your head down. I’d like to get back into the office if I can.”

Bess nodded.

They quietly opened the solid red door. There were several customers in the gallery, but no one seemed to take any notice of Nancy and Bess. Jennifer was discussing one of her watercolors with a customer.

The girls stood back near the door until Jennifer walked behind a wall that divided the main room in half.

“Now,” Nancy whispered.

The girls scurried to the back of the gallery and slipped into the office.

“This makes me nervous,” Bess whispered. She was rocking from foot to foot. “Let’s make it fast.”

Nancy quickly began rummaging around in the papers on top of Jennifer’s desk.

“What are you looking for?” Bess asked.

“I don’t know exactly,” Nancy said. “Something that would link Jennifer to the con. Since we didn’t get the license plate number of the car that ran us off the road, we need proof that Jennifer’s involved.”

Bess opened the office door a crack and peeked out. She gasped and whirled around to Nancy.

“She’s coming this way!” Bess whispered frantically. “The customer’s with her! How do we get out of here?”

In a panic, the girls searched the office quickly for another way out. There was none.

“Quick!” Nancy whispered. “In here!”

Grabbing Bess’s sleeve, Nancy yanked open the closet door and pulled her inside with her.

Just as they closed the closet door behind them, they heard the office door open and Jennifer walk in.

Even in the dark closet, Nancy could sense Bess's nervousness. She was squeezing Nancy's arm so hard it hurt, but Nancy didn't dare move a muscle.

"I'll be right with you," Jennifer called back to the customer. "I need some more sales receipts."

The girls heard Jennifer open her desk drawer, then close it. "Ah, here they are," she said.

Her heels clicked out of the office and the door closed once again.

Bess blew out a breath of air and collapsed against Nancy. "That was too close!" Bess whispered.

The girls carefully slipped out of the closet. "I think we'd better get out of the gallery whenever there's a chance," Nancy said.

"Good idea," Bess readily agreed.

Nancy ran her finger along the edge of the desk. Glancing down, she noticed a paper that Jennifer must have pulled out of the desk drawer while she was looking for the receipts. It hadn't been there before.

Nancy picked up the paper. "Look at this!" she whispered.

Bess glanced at the piece of paper, and her eyes widened. "It's the same handwriting as was in the note to Clark!" she said. "That same tiny printed writing."

"There's nothing here to indicate who wrote it," Nancy said. "But this note in her office, along with the red car in the garage and the painting in the closet, certainly points to Jennifer."

Nancy folded the paper and tucked it inside her pocket. Then, opening the office door a crack, she peered out.

"I don't see anybody here," she said. "Let's go. Carefully."

The girls slipped out of the office and out the gallery door without anyone seeing them. A minute later they were pulling out of the parking lot and were on their way home.

• • •

The Drews had no sooner sat down for dinner than the phone rang.

“I’ll get it,” Nancy said, excusing herself from the table. She hurried to the living room and picked up the receiver before it rang a third time.

“Hello?”

The voice was hushed. At first, Nancy thought it was another anonymous call.

“Hello,” she said again. “I can’t hear you.”

“Nancy, this is Clark Drummond.”

“Clark!” Nancy said. “What’s going on?”

He lowered his voice again, so that Nancy had to strain to hear.

“I had a call just now—” He paused. “Just a minute, I need to close the door.”

Nancy heard Clark put the phone down and walk away. A moment later, she heard a door click shut and the sound of returning footsteps.

“Nancy?”

“Yes.”

“I wanted to close the door,” Clark said. “There are several people walking around. I don’t want them to hear about what’s going on.”

“Okay, I’m listening,” Nancy said. She still didn’t know whether she could trust him. “Are you at the theater?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Nancy heard Clark clear his throat. She thought he sounded nervous.

“I was called to the phone here at the theater office about ten minutes ago,” he told her. “The caller was the same person who hired me to change the contract at the gallery.”

“Could you hear the voice any better?” Nancy asked. “Could you tell who was calling?”

“No,” Clark said.

“You couldn’t tell whether it was a man or a woman?” Nancy asked.

“No, the person just whispered again.”



Nancy remembered the whispered voice she'd heard on her own telephone line. Perhaps it was the same person.

"The voice asked me to pick up the rest of the paintings this evening," Clark said.

"Did you agree to do it?" Nancy asked.

"I put the caller off," he said. "I didn't know what you'd want me to do. I said I had an important rehearsal right away onstage and I was late. I told him—or her—to call back in an hour. What should I do?"

"Do it!" Nancy said, her voice rising with excitement. "Do what the caller says."

"Really?" Clark asked.

"Yes," Nancy said. "As soon as you get the instructions from the caller, call me back. I'll be waiting. Then we'll decide what to do."

Nancy wondered briefly if Clark could be setting her up. Was he planning for something to happen to her tonight? She would have to be on her guard, ready for anything.

"Okay," Clark agreed.

If everything works out right, she thought after she'd hung up, this case just may be wrapped up tonight!

## *A Paper-Thin Chance*

As soon as Nancy heard again from Clark, she called Lee Ann to fill her in. Fortunately, the gallery was open until nine that night while Lee Ann made final preparations for the next day's exhibition. After leaving her house, Nancy jumped in her car, picked up Bess, and raced to the Cramer Gallery.

Soon all three girls were standing just inside the Cramer Gallery's front door. Nancy looked around. "Where are Annette and Rodney?" she asked.

"We aren't usually open on Friday night," Lee Ann explained. "They have the night off. Tomorrow is going to be busy enough for them. This makes me nervous. You really think we should let Clark pick up every single painting of Mom's in the gallery?"

Nancy shook her head. "Not *all* of them. But I think you should let nine or ten go."

Lee Ann sighed anxiously. "Oh, I hope this is over tonight. This whole thing has made me so scared and—and tired. I just want it over with."

Nancy patted Lee Ann's hand. "I hope it will be, too," she said. "Do you understand my plan?"

"Yes," Lee Ann said. "Now, let's see. You're going to hide up in the upstairs office and watch from the window in case the swindler is somewhere nearby."

Nancy nodded. "Right so far."

"When we've loaded the paintings into Clark's van, you're going to come downstairs. We'll follow Clark to that phone booth at the corner of Myrtle Road and Sunset Drive—"

"Right," Nancy said. "That's where the caller told Clark to wait. The caller will phone him there with further instructions."

And Clark was warned that if he doesn't follow instructions perfectly, he can start worrying about going to jail.

"So, as long as we keep Clark's van in view, we really haven't lost the paintings," Bess pointed out.

"Yes, that's right," Nancy said.

"I guess it'll be all right," Lee Ann said. "But I'm still nervous."

"Where's your mother?" Nancy asked.

Worry filled Lee Ann's eyes. "She's at home. For now, anyway. I just hope she doesn't decide to come back to close up tonight."

"I hope so, too," Nancy said.

Lee Ann smiled a little. "Luckily it was my evening to work. At least we won't have to make explanations to anybody."

Nancy nodded. She looked at her watch.

"Clark should be along any moment," she said. "Bess, let's go upstairs."

"Okay," Lee Ann said. "I'll see you two the minute Clark starts to pull away in the van."

"Right," Nancy confirmed.

"Hurry down then," Lee Ann said. "Are you sure Clark will drive slowly to give you a chance to get to your car?"

"Yes," Nancy said. "I told him several times how important that was."

Nancy could see that Lee Ann's hand was shaking. "It'll work out," she reassured her friend, wishing she felt as confident as she sounded. "Don't worry."

She excused herself and Bess, and they climbed the stairs to the second floor. The room from where they would observe the loading of the paintings overlooked the parking lot. Nancy dragged two folding chairs over near the window so they could watch comfortably.

Nancy looked around the room. Lee Ann had said it was a second office that held older records from the gallery, but it hadn't been used lately. It was small and a bit dusty. Next to the chairs in which the girls were sitting was a small desk with a

lamp on it. Two large metal file cabinets stood against the far wall.

There was a musty smell in the room, and Nancy wished the window was open. She didn't dare open it now, though. It was time for Clark to pick up the paintings. The caller might be lurking about to make sure Clark did as he was told. If that was so, Nancy didn't want to do anything to draw attention to herself and scare the caller away.

Before long the girls heard a motor outside. Peering out, Nancy and Bess saw Clark driving up in a dark blue van. The girls slid over to the edge of their chairs and leaned forward to watch.

Clark got out of his van and walked into the gallery. At this point, Nancy knew he would greet Lee Ann and present the signed bill of sale with Lee Ann's signature on it. Together, they would load ten of Lila's paintings into the van.

Sure enough, within a couple of minutes, she and Bess saw the tops of Clark's and Lee Ann's heads as they carried the paintings to the parking lot.

Just then, Nancy was distracted by the sound of a step in the hall behind her. She whirled around in her chair just as the office door slammed shut behind them. She and Bess heard the click of a key in the lock and then the sound of footsteps running away.

Nancy leapt for the door and twisted the knob. The door wouldn't budge.

"We're locked in!" she cried.

Nancy lunged for the window and scanned the area below. Seeing no one acting suspiciously, she decided the only course of action was to alert Lee Ann that she and Bess were locked in and couldn't help her.

She banged on the door with her fists, and Bess rushed to help. "Hey!" they yelled. "Let us out!"

No one came. Moving quickly back to the window, Nancy looked down at the parking lot. Lee Ann and Clark were still loading paintings into the van.

She knocked hard on the window. "Lee Ann!" she yelled. "Clark! We're locked in here!"

Lee Ann and Clark kept moving back and forth. They obviously didn't hear her.

Nancy pulled up on the window, trying to raise it, but it didn't budge.

"The wood is warped. It's stuck shut," Nancy said to Bess. "Clark! Lee Ann!"

Bess came over and together the two of them tried to raise the window. This time they were able to nudge it up about a quarter of an inch.

Nancy put her face to the crack and yelled again.

"Clark! Lee Ann!"

They didn't look up.

Frantically, she looked around the office. "How can we get their attention?" she asked herself aloud.

A stack of papers and notebooks on the floor next to a leather case with the owner's name stenciled on it caught Nancy's eye. Moving the case aside, she grabbed a notebook from the top of the stack.

Nancy opened the notebook and hesitated a moment, looking at the first page. She gasped.

"What is it?" Bess asked, looking over her shoulder.

"I'm going to keep this," Nancy said. "I'll tell you about it later."

She tore the page out of the notebook, folded it quickly, and tucked it into her pocket. Then she began tearing out blank pages from the notebook, one after another, until she had ten of them.

Bess was looking at her as if she were crazy. "What're you going to do?"

Nancy took one of the ripped-out pages and slipped it through the crack in the window. She watched it flutter away toward the ground below.

"Maybe they'll see the paper and look up here," Nancy said.

“Just so Clark doesn’t drive away before we get out of here!” Bess said.

No one down in the parking lot noticed the white paper dropping softly to the ground, so Nancy fed another page through the window crack.

Lee Ann continued loading her mother’s paintings into the van, her face as white as one of the pages from the notebook.

“Here,” Nancy said, giving several sheets of paper to Bess. “Help me.”

Nancy slid another page out the window. Then Bess slid one out. The girls added another and another. The papers danced on the wind and fluttered and somersaulted in the air on their way to the ground.

Still, neither Clark nor Lee Ann saw them.

After the paintings were loaded, Clark spoke to Lee Ann, then climbed into the van.

“Come on!” Nancy urged them. “See the paper! Look at the paper! We’re up here, locked in!”

Just then, Nancy saw another car drive up.

“Oh, no!” Nancy cried. “It’s Lila!”

“She’s *here*?” Bess asked, horrified.

“No, don’t leave yet! We have to be able to follow you, Clark! Look at the window! Look up here!” Nancy yelled. “Clark, look up here!”

“Lee Ann!” Nancy screamed. “Look up here!”

Lee Ann, not seeing her mother for the moment, closed the van’s back door and stood watching while Clark started to pull away.

From the upstairs window, Nancy and Bess watched helplessly as Lila jumped out of her car and raced after the moving van.

*Caught in the Act*

When Lee Ann saw her mother, a look of horror passed over her face. Only then did she look up to the window where Nancy and Bess were waving frantically. Crying out, she broke away from her mother and ran toward the gallery.

Nancy willed Lee Ann to hurry. She was worried that Clark wouldn't realize they weren't following him.

Or was he planning all along to drive away with the paintings and never come back?

Within half a minute, Lee Ann had unlocked and opened the office door, and the girls were free.

"What happened?" Lee Ann asked.

"There's no time to explain now," Nancy said, rushing past Lee Ann and hurrying down the stairs to the ground floor. Bess was close behind her. "Come with me!"

"Mom's here and she's furious!" Lee Ann said, hurrying after them.

"I know," Nancy called over her shoulder. "Bring her with us. We'll explain to her what's going on while we follow Clark. There's no time to lose!"

"He left already," Lee Ann said.

"We've got to get to the corner of Myrtle and Sunset fast!" Nancy said. "That is, if Clark really told me the truth."

The girls raced out the front door and around to the parking lot. A bewildered Lila Cramer stood there.

"What on earth is going on here!" she said. "Where are all of my paintings?"

"Come with us!" Nancy said. She hopped into her Mustang and turned on the ignition. "Quickly! We'll explain on the way."

Lee Ann urgently guided her mother to the car. Nancy and Lee Ann sat in the front, and Bess and Lila climbed into the backseat.

“Where are you taking us, Nancy?” Lila demanded.

“To the corner of Myrtle and Sunset,” Nancy said. She revved the engine and headed off down the street to catch up with Clark.

“The man who took your paintings in his van will be getting instructions over the telephone about where to take them,” Nancy explained to Lila. I hope, she added silently.

“But I don’t understand,” Lila said helplessly, looking at Lee Ann.

“Mom.” Lee Ann turned to her mother, her face still as white as a sheet. “Clark Drummond, the man in the van, was hired by someone to pull a con on us. That’s why Nancy has been around the gallery so much lately. She’s been trying to help me find out who is behind this.”

Nancy noticed that Lee Ann didn’t tell Lila of their doubts about Clark.

“But why didn’t you tell me?” Lila asked.

Lee Ann looked at the floor. “I was afraid—” She didn’t finish her sentence.

“Of what?” Lila asked. When Lee Ann didn’t answer, Lila’s eyes widened. “Well, why did you let this Clark—whatever his name is—take the paintings?” she asked finally.

“We were going to follow him,” Lee Ann said helplessly. “To find out who hired him.”

Lila shook her head and said softly, “This is too much. It’s really just too much.”

Nancy rounded the corner on Myrtle. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Clark’s van parked at the corner. “Clark’s at the phone booth,” she told the others.

She pulled her car to the side of the road and waited. Nancy watched Clark nod and speak several words into the telephone receiver. He listened, said a few more words, and hung up. Then he lifted the receiver, deposited some coins, spoke a few words



into the phone, and hung up again. Finally, he walked out of the phone booth.

Nancy saw Clark glance casually up and down the street. She was sure he saw her car.

“He knows we’re with him,” Nancy said to the others. “Now we’ll follow him at a safe distance.”

She let Clark get a half-block ahead of her before she slowly pulled back into traffic.

The summer sun was low in the sky, casting long blue-gray shadows across the street. They had less than a half-hour till dark, Nancy knew. She hoped that it was enough time and that the swindler would show up before it got too dark.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” Lila said softly. “Who would do such a thing to my gallery—to me?”

Nancy glanced over her shoulder at Lila and said, “We’ll find out in a few minutes. I think you’re going to be surprised.”

Lee Ann turned to Nancy with a curious look, but she remained quiet.

“He’s taking us out of town,” Lila said. “I wonder where he was told to go.” A long moment passed before she spoke again. “Are you positive he’s on our side?” she asked worriedly. “What if he’s leading us into a trap?”

“If he wanted to double-cross us,” Nancy told her, “he would have simply taken off with the paintings when he had the chance.”

Lila continued to look worried, but she didn’t say anything more.

Nancy followed Clark, leaving plenty of space between her car and the van. They were on the highway now. Nancy remembered the last time they had driven this route, when she and Bess had been run off the road. She hoped this drive would have a happier—and safer—ending.

After about five miles, Clark’s van turned off the highway and onto a smaller road. Nancy dropped back a bit farther so that it wouldn’t be so obvious that she was following him. She glanced in her rearview mirror—and caught her breath.

A red sedan, identical to Jennifer's car, was following them. Was it Jennifer following them?

Nancy looked quickly at the others. She considered mentioning the car behind them, but she decided not to. They were already nervous enough. It would only alarm them more. Besides, it would also mean explaining more to Lila. At the moment, she only wanted to concentrate on getting to the bottom of this case once and for all.

After several more miles, Clark turned right, onto a gravel road. Nancy's car bumped and jolted as she followed, swerving to avoid potholes on the uneven surface. They rounded a corner, and a large deserted barn came into view.

"Clark's slowing," Nancy said. "This must be the place. Yes, he's pulling over by that barn. I'm going to park down beyond him."

She passed the van and continued down the road, finally stopping at a lane which led up to an old farmhouse.

Nancy glanced over her shoulder. The red car must have turned off; she didn't see it anywhere behind her. This made her nervous. Whoever was driving the car was obviously involved in the con. Where could the car have gone?

"What now?" Bess asked, breaking into Nancy's thoughts.

"We need to get closer to the barn," Nancy said. "Let's head back in that direction on foot. Stay close to the brush alongside the road. If we see a car approaching, we'll hide."

Nancy led Lila, Lee Ann, and Bess back toward the barn where Clark had pulled in. Stopping a hundred feet from the barn, they hid themselves in dense shrubbery.

"Let's just wait and see what happens," Nancy said.

They watched Clark get out of the van, walk to the side of the vehicle, slide open the door, and lift one of the paintings out. He moved to the barn and swung the door open.

"He's leaving my paintings in the barn!" Lila cried. "They'll get damaged, wet—I'm going to get them!"

Nancy stopped her, placing a firm hand on her shoulder. "If we don't see this through till the end," she said to Lila, "you

won't know who cheated you. That person could come along and pull some other kind of con. Besides, I don't think the paintings will be there very long.

Clark went back to the van for another load. Within a few minutes, all of the paintings were inside the barn. He climbed back into the van and slowly drove off.

"What do we—?" Lila began.

"We wait," Nancy said.

"It's nearly eight-thirty. It's getting dark," Lee Ann pointed out. "Maybe the con artist will wait till morning to pick up the paintings."

"I doubt it," Nancy said. "They're too important."

The sun slid down over the horizon. Sitting in the twilight, Nancy, Lila, Bess, and Lee Ann watched the barn slowly disappear into the gloom of night.

"Do you have a flashlight?" Bess asked.

"Yes," Nancy said. "In my purse. I thought we might be waiting in the dark tonight."

Lee Ann grabbed Nancy's arm as she was reaching for the small flashlight. "There! A car!" she said.

The sound of an engine approached. They watched breathlessly as a pair of headlights cut through the night and shone on the barn. The car slowed, then came to a stop just at the edge of the barn.

Nancy squinted into the darkness. Was it the red car? It was too dark to tell.

The driver got out of the car and switched on a flashlight. Nancy couldn't see if the person was a man or a woman. Whoever it was moved to the barn, opened the door, and disappeared inside.

"When do we confront this person?" Lila whispered.

"As soon as we see him—or her—come out with a painting," Nancy said.

The dark figure emerged from the barn a moment later holding one of the paintings.

"Okay," Nancy said. "Let's go see who this is."

The four women quietly stepped toward the barn, Nancy in the lead.

The figure looked up, hearing them approaching. Nancy switched on her flashlight and shone it in the person's face.

Lee Ann gasped.

Lila cried out.

"Annette!" they both said together.

## ***A Final Note***

Annette's eyes darted about, looking for a way to escape. Then, realizing she was outnumbered, her shoulders sagged, and she stared at the ground.

"Why?" Lila said, approaching Annette. Her voice was filled with pain. "Annette, *why?*"

Nancy stepped up to Annette and Lila. "Lila," she said, "let me introduce you to Annette Williams Hoops. Jennifer Williams's sister."

They all turned at a rustling sound behind them. Out of the darkness came the black silhouette of a figure on foot. Nancy shone the flashlight's beam upon the intruder.

Annette gasped. "Jennifer! What are you doing here? How did you know about this?"

"Rodney told me about the con," Jennifer told her sister. "Then in my upstairs office, I found the painting of Lila's that he supposedly bought. You and I were the only people that had keys to that office, so I figured it had to be you who were behind the whole thing."

Annette turned to Nancy. "Jennifer didn't know anything about this. She wasn't involved."

"Except that I thought the best way to cover for you was to put the blame on Rodney," Jennifer said.

"You did?" Annette asked. "To protect me?"

Jennifer nodded. "I knew he'd be cleared right away. I decided to return the painting tonight. When I drove up, I saw Lila hysterical in the driveway, so I thought something must be up. That's why I followed your car, Nancy."

A whirling light appeared in the distance down the road.

“The police!” Jennifer cried out. “Who called them?”

“Clark Drummond,” Nancy said calmly. “Just after he received Annette’s call in the phone booth. I asked him to do that when we worked out the plan for tonight.”

The patrol car pulled to a stop just behind Nancy’s car. The officer stepped out of his car and reached for the handcuffs at his waist.

• • •

“Lila, this fried chicken is delicious,” Nancy said, dabbing at her mouth with a napkin.

Lila, Carson, Nancy, and Bess were all sitting around the Cramers’ dining-room table.

“Thank you, Nancy,” Lila said. “It’s been a while since I cooked like this. I was a little nervous about how it would turn out.”

Lee Ann entered the dining room with a pitcher of iced tea and kissed her mother’s cheek. “It’s really great, Mom,” she said. “Just like you used to make.”

Lila smiled. “Now that this crazy adventure is over,” she said with a sigh, “I guess I can relax a little.”

“The exhibition was great,” Lee Ann said. “But you know there will be many more.”

“Oh, I’ll have paintings in shows, of course,” Lila said. “But after I saw how sorry Jennifer was about what her sister did, I have to say I feel differently about the exhibition. Somehow I feel less competitive with Jen.” She smiled. “Funny, I haven’t called her Jen since we were in college together;”

Lee Ann turned to Nancy. “I haven’t gotten a chance to ask you, Nancy—how did you figure out it was Annette who pulled the con?”

“Well,” Nancy began, “I have to admit that when I saw the note in Jennifer’s office with the same printing as the con artist’s note to Clark—and then when Bess and I saw the red car in Jennifer’s garage—I was almost sure that Jennifer was the culprit. But later I remembered that Lee Ann had said that

Annette saw the melodrama and enjoyed it. That's how she got the idea to use Clark's acting skills to pull the con."

"So did Annette use Jennifer's car to run you and Bess off the road?" Lee Ann asked.

"Yes," Nancy said. "Annette occasionally visited the Red Door Gallery. She left notes for Jennifer in that distinctive handwriting—"

"Which she never used at the Cramer Gallery?" Lee Ann guessed.

"Right," Nancy confirmed. "And while Bess and I were locked in the upstairs office of Lila's gallery, I saw the art portfolio. It had Annette's full name on it: Annette Williams Hoops."

"Annette Williams Hoops?" Lee Ann repeated, amazed. "You know, I remember seeing that portfolio before, but I never suspected that the Williams name was related to Jennifer!"

Nancy nodded. "Williams *is* a fairly common name. But the clincher was this," she went on. She pulled a piece of paper out of her purse.

"A blank sheet of paper," Lee Ann said, looking over Nancy's shoulder. "What kind of clue was that?"

Nancy grinned mysteriously. "Do you have a pencil, Lee Ann?" she asked.

Lee Ann disappeared and returned a moment later with an orange pencil.

"Watch this," Nancy said.

Everyone leaned forward as Nancy laid the paper on the table. She took the pencil and lightly scribbled over the page. Gradually, letters and sentences emerged.

Lee Ann gasped. "It's the note that was sent to Clark!"

Nancy nodded. "That's right," she said. "When Annette printed her note to Drummond, she pressed down pretty hard. The indentation of the whole letter was right there on the top page in the notebook, the page that had been directly under the original note. See? The letter had to have been written by someone in Lila's gallery who had an association with Jennifer.

When I saw Annette's portfolio with this note, I put it all together."

Carson Drew patted his daughter's shoulder. "That was fine detective work, Nancy," he said proudly. "But what was Annette's motive? Why would she go to work for Lila in the first place?"

It was Lee Ann who spoke up. "Maybe she didn't like Mom being such a tough competitor for her sister."

Nancy nodded. "That was part of it. But there's another reason, too. Annette told me that she had always wanted to go to art school, but there wasn't any money. She said that her sister was going to send her, but then it wasn't possible. Jennifer is quite a bit older than Annette, and I think she looked after her little sister. Up until a year ago, Annette was living in their hometown. Jennifer persuaded her to come to River Heights.

"But when Lila's gallery became so successful so quickly, it drew business away from Jennifer while she was just getting her business started. Jennifer didn't have the money to send Annette to art school. Annette wanted to get back at Lila for the loss of her art career. It was easy to be angry with her when her sister and Lila were feuding anyway."

Lila's cheeks turned red, and she fingered the tines of her fork. After an awkward moment, she spoke.

"You know," she said slowly, "when I hired Annette, she told me that her sister was an artist in another state. She said her sister couldn't afford to hire her, so she came to River Heights to look for work."

"That's right," Bess said. "Rodney told us he'd asked Jennifer for a job and—" She paused in midsentence. "Say, what about Rodney, anyway?"

"I think he told Jennifer about the Cramer Gallery con out of spite," Nancy said. "He'd promised Lee Ann he wouldn't tell, but he was so angry at Lila he told Jennifer anyway. He didn't care about breaking his word."

Lee Ann smiled. "Did you hear the good news about Rodney?"



“What?” Nancy asked.

“A new gallery opening in town has asked to show Rodney’s work. You should’ve seen the smile spread across his face when he got that phone call. Calmed him down plenty.”

“Terrific,” Nancy said. “It’s too bad Jennifer couldn’t have hired him earlier, but she couldn’t afford to hire *anyone* until a few months ago, when she hired Cathy Stark. By that time, I think Annette had already decided to ruin you, Lila. I’m sure she didn’t tell her sister.”

“I don’t think Jennifer knew anything was going on,” Lila agreed. “She must’ve wondered why her sister would work for me, though.”

“Mom could afford to pay her employees higher wages,” Lee Ann said matter-of-factly. “Jennifer knew that her sister was broke and probably thought Annette did it for the money.”

There was another lull in the conversation. Then Lila cleared her throat. “This whole episode has made me realize a few things,” she said. “I’ve been looking at myself pretty hard the past few days, and I think it’s time I made a few changes. First, I’d like to talk to Annette. I’m going to drop the charges against her.”

“Really, Mom?” Lee Ann said. “Why?”

Lila smiled ruefully. “Well, let’s look at it this way. If I’d been a little—well, *easier* to be around, maybe Annette would’ve decided she actually *liked* me, and this whole thing wouldn’t have happened.

“I guess I *have* been pretty self-centered,” Lila continued. “I was particularly hurt that my own daughter didn’t feel that she could come to me and tell me what was going on.” Turning to Lee Ann, she said, “That must’ve been quite a burden for you to carry around, honey. I’m sorry.”

Lee Ann reached over and hugged her mother. Carson Drew winked at Nancy, who was sitting next to him. Nancy knew they were both thinking the same thing: It was good to have the old Lila back.

“I sure am glad to have the burden lifted,” Lee Ann said. “The Cramer Gallery is *still* the best gallery in this part of the country, and it’s running normally once again, thanks to my good friend Nancy Drew!”

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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